

Have Your Cake and Eat It



Cunegonde

Awake

The first thing he noticed was not the lumpy pillow, nor the muted shuffling sounds of other people, nor the weird and dreary light that washed over his face in shifting waves. He had been shunted from place to place for days, drifting in and out of consciousness as volunteers from every part of the country scrambled to make space for all the wounded. No, the first thing he noticed was the absence of pain. He almost felt like he could get up and do a jig, if he wanted. He would have to send the world's largest box of chocolates to whichever healer had made this happen.

He opened his eyes. It took a moment, as his vision was still blurred with sleep, to recognise the canopy of a Gryffindor dormitory bed. Ah. So Gryffindor had been converted to an infirmary. It made sense; plenty of empty beds, fresh air, cheery atmosphere, proximity to the site of the battle. He could have sworn he'd been at St. Mungo's before, but perhaps he had only imagined that. He stared at the canopy, tracing the familiar patterns of the wood grain with his eyes, the way he used to do in the early light of dawn when he was having trouble sleeping. It was comforting. He used to gaze upward, reconfiguring the shapes into different constellations as if it were the ceiling in the Great Hall. And there, there was the knot that looked like a goose with a broken leg; the one he had stared at all night, the very first night he arrived at Hogwarts, his funny and graceless secret talisman. How lovely it was to see it again; what perfect symmetry. Surely the healers could not have known they were placing him in his own old school bed. It was just one of those little quirks of fate, those private moments of wonder that make living worthwhile. And it did; Remus was struck by the realisation that he was grateful to be alive.

He rolled over and punched the pillow, trying to mould it into a more supportive form. How had he slept on such a deplorable pillow for seven years? As he did so, he made contact with a solid object tucked halfway under the pillow. He pulled out a slim paperback and examined it in the light. *Herbology for Hobbyists, Second Edition*, 1965. Strange. It looked familiar — he thought he remembered reading it at some point, though he couldn't recall anything about the text. He flipped it open to look for a Table of Contents and saw a name inscribed in familiar looped handwriting: *R. J. Lupin, Gryffindor House*. His heart leapt to his throat.

Before he could even begin to process that, something else caught his eye. There was a smear of ink on his left hand, scrubbed-at but still faintly visible. He remembered how he used to scrawl reminders all over his arms, before he learned a bit more discipline; back then he probably wouldn't have owned a diary if not for the necessity of tracking the lunar cycle. He drew his hand close, trying to make out the word. It looked like 'Black Treacle'. Or maybe 'Bowtruckle'? He had scant time to puzzle it over before a pillow hit him full in the face.

"Honestly, mate, I know you've got a very special relationship with your left hand, but if you keep staring at it all morning you're going to miss breakfast."

Remus nearly launched himself out of bed with fright. Sitting on the edge of the neighbouring bed

was a young Sirius Black, fussing with his tie. He always used to tie a perfect knot, then loosen it just enough to make it look like he'd put it on in a hurry. Remus remembered. He looked around the room. All of his friends were there, even Peter. Of course. He was dreaming.

He screwed up his face and tried to float, but nothing happened. Next, he tried to turn Peter into a rat, but human he remained. That figured. Remus had had this sort of dream before, where he was just lucid enough to know that he was dreaming but not quite in control of what happened around him. As is the way of dreams, he rapidly adjusted to the setting and got dressed for breakfast. He was excited to see what they would have. Usually when he dreamed about food he would wake up just before the first bite, but maybe this time he would score some metaphysical black pudding first.

The Great Hall was full of faces he recognised but couldn't quite put a name to. Funny how the mind catalogues faces, stores them deep down below the level of conscious memory to use as stock figures in the theatre of dreams. He studied his friends, too, staring unabashedly. They were exactly as he had known them, and yet they all looked so *small*. They were young. James had grown upward but not yet outward; Remus had forgotten those few interim months of gangly awkwardness. Sirius' face was cherubic. Peter's hands looked impossibly soft.

For his own part, Remus felt incredible. The old cliché was true: youth is wasted on the young. He felt like running up and down the stairways and cartwheeling across the quidditch pitch, just because he could.

Gradually, as he scraped his plate clean, it dawned on Remus that he had no idea what he was meant to do next. Even if he knew what day it was, he certainly couldn't recall his old class schedules after two decades. For that matter, he wasn't even sure what year it was. He felt for the inner pocket of his robe and was relieved to find his old, woefully neglected diary inside. He pulled it out, trying to look casual as he skimmed for the schedule he was *sure* he must have slipped in there somewhere. Of course, James noticed.

"Sorry," James said teasingly, breaking off the story he'd been telling, "do you have an important appointment to get to?"

"I think he's got a date with his sweetheart," Sirius said, wiggling his left fingers in a vaguely obscene way.

"I'm just looking for today's schedule," Remus muttered, barely registering the joke. "There was something I needed to remember for class, but I can't remember what it was."

"You know it's Sunday, right?" Peter asked, looking at him curiously.

"What? Oh. Right. Err, I meant tomorrow, then." Remus felt his face grow warm.

"You know, sometimes I think you'd forget your own head if it wasn't attached to your shoulders," said James. Odd. His mother used to say the same thing.

"James! Don't be so insensitive," Sirius said in mock disapproval, nodding toward Nearly Headless Nick. They sniggered.

Meanwhile, Remus was flipping through the pages. He may not have been good at writing down his assignments, but he had faithfully marked off every day that passed with a small strike through the numeral date. It was a handy tool, far less suspicious than keeping a lunar calendar on his person; just a regular diary that happened to include the moon phases. Remus reached the final strikethrough and looked at the present date: 15 February 1976. Full moon. He looked up at the

ceiling and watched grey, unfriendly clouds whip around a sky that was still not fully light. Of course it had to be February. He suddenly felt as if there were Dementors lurking behind the clouds.

“Remus? You all right?” James asked, all sincerity now.

“Hmm? Sure. It’s just a bit gloomy today, isn’t it?” Remus responded.

“A good day to loaf by the fire,” Peter said.

“A good day to make trouble,” Sirius corrected.

Something about Sirius’ charming little smirk jogged Remus’ memory. Full moon. February. Full moon. Fifth year. Oh, no. It was the full moon. It was *the* full moon. It made sense, of course. It was the most traumatic episode of his school years. Normally in this dream he woke up *after* the full moon, but the mind was infinitely inventive in its torments. He wondered if Sirius had already talked to Snape about the Whomping Willow. For the first time all morning, he sought out the man — the boy — sitting across the hall at the Slytherin table. He spotted him instantly, because Snape was staring straight at him, loathing and suspicion writ large across his face. He looked down as soon as Remus caught him staring. Interesting. Snape had evidently not perfected the skill of masking his emotions, yet.

Remus and his friends did spend an hour or so loafing by the fire in the Gryffindor common room. Remus tried to read, but he soon gave up and simply lay there, sprawled on his belly, basking in the warmth, the headiness of being in a safe place with a full stomach and good friends. He thought there was something he was meant to remember about Peter, something that should make him angry, but how could Remus be angry with the sweet child who was using the small of his back as a pillow while he fiddled with a cat’s cradle? Peter was the only other person who really understood the value of quiet idleness, of simply resting and soaking in the moment, storing and saving up every bit of warmth for a rainy day. It was a solid basis for a friendship.

Then Sirius said, “I’m bored,” and Remus tensed like it was a threat. Wasn’t it, in a way? “I need to get out and stretch my legs. Mind if I take the Map with me? I don’t want to run into anyone who might try and make conversation.”

“Can I come with?” Remus asked, sitting up abruptly. He was on high alert now.

“Ouch,” said Peter as his head hit the floor.

“Err, no offence,” Sirius said, “but I sort of want to be on my own for a bit. Clear my head.”

“Please?” Remus pushed him. “I won’t talk your ear off. I just need to burn some energy, too, and I really don’t want to —” *Don’t want to let you out of my sight today*, he thought. He let the sentence trail off.

Sirius frowned. He always was intuitive about this sort of thing, however lacking in social graces he may have been otherwise. Under normal circumstances, Remus would never intrude on the sacredness of someone else’s Alone Time. “All right,” Sirius capitulated. “Let’s go. I guess we don’t need the Map, then. If we run into anyone annoying, I’ll just fob them off on you.”

“Great,” said Remus.

They roamed aimlessly through the building in mostly comfortable silence. Remus tried hard to remember what he and Sirius had ever talked about when they were alone together, but he couldn’t seem to come up with a single thing. After Azkaban, their main subject of conversation had been

Harry Potter, and that was rather out of the question at present. Maybe they had always been this quiet together. Maybe that was why they were friends.

"I don't like him. He's too quiet. It gives me the creeps."

"So? I'm quiet, too."

"Yes, but you're Fun Quiet. I like Fun Quiet. It means I get to talk more."

Remus snorted, recalling the conversation they'd had in first year. Sirius glanced at him, but didn't ask. He was clearly used to Remus getting caught up in his own thoughts. Unfortunately, as if summoned by Remus' memory, Severus Snape appeared around the next corner, walking toward them on a collision course. Remus froze. Why did they make this corridor so *long*? The Four Founders had obviously possessed an overdeveloped sense of drama. He swallowed hard. *This is it.* Remus recognised it immediately, although he hadn't been there the first time. This was the moment, a chance meeting between Sirius and Snape, when Sirius would plant the awful seed of an idea in Snape's mind.

Sirius was still walking forward. It took Remus a moment to realise this and start moving again, which had the regrettable effect of making it look like he was following at Sirius' heels.

"Black," Snape spat, and then, like an afterthought, "Lupin. What are *you* doing down here? Gracing the dungeons with your exalted presence?" Were they in the dungeons? Remus hadn't been paying attention to where they walked. Snape looked so very small and spindly.

Sirius kept walking. He passed Snape without so much as glancing in his direction. "Did you hear something, Remus? Sounded a bit like a mosquito in my ear." Remus answered with the smallest and most non-committal noise he could muster. He knew how angry Snape would be.

"Let me use smaller words for you. What the *hell* do you think you're up to?" Bullseye. Sirius really was a master at work. Provoke him when he's minding his own business; ignore him when he tries to provoke. Snape's words bounced hollowly off the corridor walls. Remus resisted the urge to turn and look back at him.

"You know," Sirius said to Remus, "if we ran into a Slytherin *prefect* down here, we'd have to tell them where we were going. Good thing the only *prefect* around here is yourself."

A pregnant pause. Sirius quietly mouthed the words "In three, two, one..." and then Snape hurled a hex at their retreating backs. Remus grabbed Sirius and pulled him around the corner. "Let's go," Sirius said as he took off at a sprint. Remus nimbly caught up with him. They darted up the first staircase they found and didn't stop running until they'd made it up four flights. Sirius leaned heavily on a baluster, laughing too hard to catch his breath. Remus was surprised to hear himself laughing too. He was dizzy with adrenaline. His lungs felt expansive.

"God, that was perfect. Shame we didn't get to see his face, but it was worth it," Sirius wheezed. "I've got no patience at all for his rubbish today. It's a good thing you were there, or I might have gone off the rails. Nice reflexes there, by the way."

"Thanks. I've had practice." Over twenty years of practice, in fact. Yes, it was a good thing Remus had been there. A very good thing. A wonderful thing, even. He watched Sirius' laughing face and felt a wave of *déjà vu*. This part wasn't a memory, this had never actually happened, and yet there was something familiar in it. Running. Laughing. Sweat. Dimples.

Once he had calmed down, Sirius asked, "Back to the Tower? Or would you rather keep walking?"

“Keep walking, just for a bit. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” They walked. “So,” Sirius said, which was how he always began serious conversations he wasn’t sure how to broach. “Everything all right?” It was vague, but Remus understood.

“I’m not sure,” Remus answered. “I have this sense — I just don’t want to be alone today. I can’t really explain it. Thanks for walking with me. I mean it.” It was all true, if not the whole truth.

“Any time,” Sirius answered, seeming relieved at the brevity of their conversation. Remus had forgotten how reserved, how stoic, how very *English* Sirius could be back then. Azkaban had wrenched that right out of him, raised all his emotions to the surface but never quite extracted them, so that when he came out all he wanted to do was talk about his feelings; a lifetime of stifled feelings that had begun building up long before his incarceration. It seemed sad to Remus. No child ought to have such a stiff upper lip.

They stopped to drink at a baroque fountain set into a corner on the sixth floor. Sirius splashed his face with water. Remus studied him. He really did look different with his round, smooth face, obnoxiously dewy and well-rested. Sirius smiled again. Dimples. Laughter. *Sweat. Laughter. Dimples.*

Remus doubled over in pain. It took all he had not to scream. He thought for certain he had been attacked, but no, it was only emotional pain, and he was sobbing, sobbing, hyperventilating. His wife was dead. *His wife was dead.* Oh, God. The first question he had asked in one of his fleeting moments of consciousness after the battle. The healer hadn’t wanted to answer, but Harry told him the truth. Harry would always tell him the truth. Harry understood.

He saw her laughing, soaked through in her linen shirt, ice clinging to her hair, not a glittering elegant dusting of ice, just dull wet clumps. A sudden gust of hail on a sunny May day, no more than ten minutes, just enough to ensure that they were thoroughly saturated; other people stepping out of shops and restaurants perfectly dry and put-together, hurrying past and casting strange looks their way. If he had been alone it would have ruined his whole day, but with Nymphadora Tonks it seemed delightful, miraculous, a little private joke between her and himself and the troposphere. They had gone back to her flat, and he had helped peel her out of her wet clothes, and they had made love for the first time right there by the fire. He knocked over a cup of cold forgotten tea with his foot, and she laughed as he offered a dozen outsize apologies for the mess. Remus strained to listen for the sound of her laughter, but she was quiet, quiet, and all he heard was a boyish voice calling his name from somewhere above the surface.

“Remus. Remus! Come on old boy, snap out of it!” Remus couldn’t look at Sirius. His face was too much like hers. “Look at me.” Hands gripped his shoulders. “Remus John Lupin!”

Remus didn’t want to snap out of it. He’d frittered away the whole morning, lost in a pleasant dream, while the woman he loved was dead. Had she even been laid to rest yet? He had no idea how much time had passed. Had she been cremated? She wanted to be cremated. They had talked about it on their first date. What if she hadn’t been cremated, because Remus wasn’t there to tell them? What if she had been laid in the cold ground next to ancestors she’d always hated? It was unthinkable.

“Come on. There now, that’s it, eyes up. What’s going on? What is it?”

Remus tried to get his voice working. He couldn’t tell Sirius the truth. *It’s just that I looked at you, and you looked like my future wife who’s going to die in twenty-two years, and I don’t know what they’ve done with her body.* He couldn’t tell anyone. “I’m afraid,” he choked out, surprising himself. A different truth came to him readily. “I’ve got a bad feeling. Like a premonition, almost.

Don't laugh."

"Mate, I'm definitely not laughing."

"I have a bad feeling this month. I feel like I'm going to hurt someone. I'm afraid."

Sirius looked about quickly, then whispered, "Don't even think like that. You're not going to hurt anyone, Moony. I know you."

"You can't say that. You can't be sure, not ever. I need you to understand. It's my greatest fear. I would rather die than attack another person." He gripped Sirius back, looking into his eyes with attempted steadiness. "Do you understand me? I would rather *die*."

"All right, all right, yes, I understand. Come on, let's not talk about this here." Sirius helped Remus up and began to steer him back to Gryffindor, watching the portraits uneasily all the while.

"Stay with me tonight?" Remus asked feebly.

"Always do, don't I? Jesus, Remus, are you trying to get a rumour going or something?" Sirius darted a glance at the slumbering shepherdess in a nearby tapestry, a notorious gossip. Remus couldn't help laughing a little at that.

"You've got to admit, it would still sound better than the truth," Remus said. "I mean it, though. Promise me?"

"Cross my heart."

"Until I wake up in the morning?"

"Sure. I'll even skip Herbology."

"What a noble sacrifice."

"That's why they put me in Gryffindor," Sirius said solemnly. "Here. Wait." They stopped before the portrait entrance and Sirius gave Remus a once-over. He fished a tiny dropper bottle out of his pocket. "Your eyes are all red. Use this. And fix your hair."

"Thanks," Remus said, accepting. Coming from Sirius, 'you look like shit' was as good as an oath of eternal loyalty. "I'm not going to ask why you have this on hand."

"Much better. Gloria Steinem!" The portrait door swung open. "Honestly, why did they ever start letting Evans set the passwords?"

Remus giggled, a little damp muted sound that developed into a full-throated laugh as he stepped into the common room. He was depleted. He desperately wanted to nap, but he had to stay alert. He had a long and terrifying night ahead.

Good night, and good luck

He must have drifted off to sleep. His friends were all gathered in the corner, sitting on Peter's bed, whispering and looking his way with concern. Good. Let them be concerned for him. If they were concerned, maybe they wouldn't do anything foolish. He closed his eyes again. As long as they were all accounted for, he felt safe.

Remus was barely present by the time he was escorted to the Whomping Willow. It was one of those glorious evenings when moonrise would come directly after sunset, and the foreboding clouds of the early morning had turned out a spectacular display of pink and orange to see him off. His mind was far away, with the person he loved most of all. Remus ached to hold his child, ached and wanted more than he'd ever thought possible, ached so much he could barely walk without staggering. He'd always thought the phrase 'with every fibre of my being' sounded trite, but now, as his fibres were stretched to the breaking point with longing, he understood. He rapidly cycled through all the good things he could remember, every detail he had gleaned in his moments of lucidity, trying to keep himself afloat. Teddy was safe. Harry was alive. Harry had been by his side, speaking to him. They won the battle. Teddy was safe. They won the war. God, it was dark down in the tunnel. He wished he could linger and watch the sun disappear. Teddy was safe. Teddy was sweetly oblivious to the world around him. Teddy would never see his mother again. Would Teddy ever see his father again? No, no, no, no...

He opened his eyes. Such an ugly ceiling. Cheap, sound-dampening panels ringed with water damage and bat feces. This place was never built to last.

He felt warm and heavy. It took a moment to realise it was only Padfoot sleeping on his stomach. He plunged his fingers into the soft, dense fur. The bed smelled like wet dog. It was strangely comforting. The dog leapt off, and a moment later Sirius returned with a steaming covered plate and a whole carafe of apple juice. "I've got breakfast. Careful," he said as Remus tried to sit up too quickly.

This wasn't it. This wasn't how the memory went at all. "How did last night go?" Remus asked anxiously.

"Oh, it was great fun. You gave your paw a nasty scrape, though. I'm afraid you'll have to go righty for a little while."

Remus turned his left hand over and examined the angry gash across his palm. Not too deep, but it would most likely scar. How strange. He'd never had a scar there. "Lucky, I seem to have missed the major arteries," he said.

"You managed to miss your life line too. Look, see?" Sirius pointed.

"It's gone clean through my head line, though."

"I don't think that'll make much difference," Sirius said with a snort.

"Breakfast first, then sutures," said Remus.

"Sutures?" Sirius asked as he passed the plate to Remus.

"Oh, right. Muggle thing. I forgot." Remus lifted the cloth napkin from the plate to reveal a stack of sausages, fried haggis and tattie scones. "You're an angel," he sighed. "I'm in heaven and you're an angel."

"Piss-poor excuse for an afterlife, if you ask me. You can thank James, he got up early to bring it over before class. Oi, half of that's for me, you know."

"You all stayed? The whole night?" Remus asked.

"Of course we did. You asked us to, didn't you? James just *had* to run off to class and make me look bad. I've got no idea where Peter went, actually."

On cue, Remus felt tiny claws scrabbling up his back, and a moment later Wormtail was perched on his shoulder, whiskers tickling Remus' ear. Remus, embarrassingly, yelped in surprise. Sirius bent over with laughter. "Oh, that's *classic*. Thanks for that," he said to the rat, feeding him a corner of tattie scone. Wormtail scuttled off with it.

"I'm curious," Sirius said, "when you turn back into a human, are you still full from eating crumbs as a rat?"

"Not sure yet," Peter said after a quick transformation. "When you turn back from a dog, are you still full from licking your own arsehole?"

"*Jesus*," Sirius grimaced, "it was an honest question." Remus started laughing so suddenly that apple juice dribbled from his mouth, which set Peter and Sirius off too.

"What time is it?" Remus asked once he had stopped convulsing.

Sirius pulled a gold watch out of his pocket. "Quarter to nine," he said.

"You know, you still have time to make it to Herbology. You're already dressed."

"Can't. Didn't bring my tie with me. Can't go to class without my tie, it'd be improper."

They left separately, Sirius and Peter scampering back to Gryffindor with the Map and Remus trudging to the Hospital Wing. He clenched his fist, trying to shield his throbbing palm from the February wind. Breakfast first, then sutures? God, what was wrong with him? He seemed to have reverted to the judgment skills of a fifteen-year-old, too.

His visit to the infirmary was uneventful. He sighed with relief as Poppy — Madame Pomfrey — numbed and bandaged his hand, even as she scolded him all the while. "Why didn't you ring the bell?" she asked him. "The bell is there for a reason."

"I forgot," Remus said sheepishly, which was the truth. The bell, linked to the Hospital Wing via a protean charm, was designed to silently alert Madame Pomfrey when Remus was awake and ready to leave the Shack. There was no need to walk back across the grounds by himself.

He thought of how this morning had gone in real life. The shock of waking up with Albus Dumbledore at his bedside had been only the first in a chain of surreal and terrible events. He remembered hushed and urgent whispers flying all around him as he dazedly fought to stay awake. James with tears in his downcast eyes as he explained to Remus what had transpired during the night. God, why had they made James explain it to him, instead of one of the adults? Was it some kind of punishment? No, that didn't make sense. James must have volunteered, trying to soften the blow. That seemed more like him. It was so far away now; the actual events of the day were obscured by layer upon layer of psychological scar tissue. He could no longer piece together the sequence of events, but whatever had happened next, he wasn't released back to Gryffindor with a bandage and a light admonishment. He certainly hadn't been cleared to attend his afternoon Potions class.

"How'd it go?" Sirius asked when Remus entered the dormitory. Sirius was hiding out on the floor between their two beds, finishing the Herbology essay that had been due that morning.

"Passed with flying colours. I even get to go back to class today. Best of all, my left hand is completely numb. I'm going to need the room to myself for a while."

"You're absolutely disgraceful. I've got to get to Divination, anyway. I still can't understand why you dropped it. We're doing onions again today."

Alone for the first time in days, Remus toyed with the idea of actually following through on his half-hearted joke, but he found he couldn't touch himself without thinking of Tonks, and he couldn't think of Tonks without vomiting. He sobbed, wishing he had someone to hold back his hair and coo reassurances at the back of his head. So much for his adolescent libido. After vanishing his sick, he crawled back into bed and passed the rest of the morning crying. It was all he really wanted to do, anyway.

The happy occasion that finally dragged him from his bed was Potions with Slytherin. Remus stared forlornly at his class schedule, which he had finally discovered sandwiched between the pages of his Muggle Studies textbook. Why was it *always* Potions with Slytherin? Was it inscribed somewhere in the Hogwarts charter? He tucked the schedule back into his textbook, next to a passage on tin mining, knowing that he would never find the damned thing again if he didn't leave it in the same place.

(What a lark that had been, taking O.W.L.-level Muggle Studies. He supposed it came from the same perverse impulse that once drove him to read every text on werewolves in the school library. The worst part was that he'd only scored an Acceptable on the exam, a fact that had never stopped irking him.)

His heart pounded as he made his way to the dungeons. In twenty years, Remus had probably spent more time in nightmares about his classes than he'd ever spent sitting through them. Usually, he was sent back to school on a technicality that required him to retake a first-year class or lose all his qualifications. Sometimes he would show up and discover he had neglected to write a paper he'd had all term to complete. Occasionally he would be sitting in class in his wolf's body, haplessly trying to grip his wand with no opposable thumbs. He'd hoped the dreams might subside after he began teaching, but his professorial nightmares had only melded into his student nightmares. On the eve of his first day teaching at Hogwarts, he had dreamed that he showed up for his Defence N.E.W.T. equipped with nothing but a dull pencil.

Remus stepped into the Potions classroom, holding his breath and wondering what horrors awaited him this time. He half expected to see Severus Snape at the head of the classroom, rather than hunched over a table near the back. Nothing bad happened to Remus right away, except for the horror of realising he had no idea where to sit. He hovered at the back of the room, knowing he was taking too long, until Slughorn clapped his hands and bellowed “Everybody up!” God bless Horace Slughorn. He was a saintly man, really.

“I’ve been reviewing the results of your independent research,” Slughorn continued, “and I must say, for the most part, I’ve been very impressed. But now the time has come to move on to our next phase of study. As you all know by now, it takes fortitude to craft a first-class potion, but it takes even greater fortitude to collaborate on one. Stand by as I call you to your work stations.” Had that really happened? Had they really been assigned new seats halfway through February? It seemed like something contrived in a dream, too much of a coincidence that this would happen *today* of all days; yet as Remus cast back, it did sound vaguely familiar. Last term before the O.W.L. exam — one third independent research, one third collaborative work, one third applied brewing. It was intended as a culmination of studies for those who, like Remus, would not continue on to N.E.W.T.-level Potions. Putting independent research at the beginning of term all but guaranteed that students would have to work through their winter holiday. Personally, Remus never would have structured a syllabus that way, but Slughorn was nothing if not set in his idiosyncratic ways.

“First up,” Slughorn said, pointing to the frontmost station on the left and reading off a roster, “Lily Evans and Marta Marin. Next,” he continued, pointing at the desk on the right, “Severus Snape and Remus Lupin.” Well. If this had been a film sequence, he would have had to wait anxiously until the very end to hear his name called out. Remus settled in at the front table. Most professors would place the troublemakers up front to keep an eye on them, but not Horace Slughorn. He wanted his darlings right up close where he could fawn over them. Remus wasn’t exactly a darling, but he was a prefect, and out of a dearth of options, that counted for something. Slughorn continued down the roster. Slytherin, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Gryffindor. Girls on the left, boys on the right, probably in a misguided attempt to cut down on distractions. How heteronormative, Remus thought. He frowned. He probably hadn’t known the word ‘heteronormative’ in 1976.

Remus *knew* he hadn’t been partnered with Snape in fifth-year Potions. Thanks to a rather obvious imbalance, he’d somehow ended up working with a Slytherin girl while two Slytherin boys sat across the aisle. Of course, he hadn’t been there the day they were assigned partners, which accounted for the imperfect arrangement. Imperfect for Slughorn, but ideal for Remus, since his partner had been serious about her work and meticulous in her note-taking. He would have taken her over any boy in class, friends included. Remus looked on with envy as the superfluous Slytherin boy was sent to sit by Remus’ rightful Potions partner.

Remus turned to Snape, who was staring at him with frightful intensity. Christ, had he been doing that the whole time? Remus felt like an ant burning under a magnifying glass, and that was the way Snape looked at him when Remus *hadn’t* come close to killing him. Thank God he’d had years to build up a tolerance. He smiled back at Snape, cheerily as he could manage under the circumstances. “Looks like I’ve lucked out this time,” Remus said. It sounded more sarcastic than he intended.

“If only I could say the same,” Snape retorted as he carefully laid out his half of the work surface. That was the expected answer. It was like he just couldn’t help himself. Remus didn’t take the bait.

“So, what did you do for your independent research portion?” Remus asked.

“I’m glad to know my presentation made such an impression on you.”

“Sorry.” Remus flushed. “They’ve all blurred together, a bit.” It was the truth. Remus wouldn’t even have remembered his own project but for the fact that he had become reasonably competent at brewing calming draughts, a skill which had proven immensely useful throughout the years. He didn’t think Snape would ask him about his project, though. Not one for small talk, that Severus Snape.

“Variations on Dreamless Sleep,” Snape said quietly after a long pause. He seemed rather chagrined to be speaking to Remus.

“Ah, yes! That’s very interesting. I was sort of working along the same lines, actually. Calming draughts.”

“I know. I pay attention during class.” Oh. Right. “And if you’d actually done the research on calming draughts, you would know that they operate on a completely different system from sleeping draughts. That’s why it’s safe to take them together.”

“Of course. You’ve caught me out. Theory has never been my strong suit.”

Snape shot him another dirty look. “Without theory, Potions is just a series of lists.”

Remus shrugged. “I’m quite good at lists.”

Happily for Remus, it was an exceptionally dull lesson with no actual brewing required. The better part of an hour was dedicated to a lecture on various interactions between cauldron materials and potions ingredients. Apparently he hadn’t missed much, all those years ago. Remus spent most of the class period daydreaming about playing with his baby. They were happy daydreams. He kept himself together.

“You know why Slughorn puts independent research at the beginning of term?” Snape murmured during a lull while Slughorn was attending to the unfavoured Slytherins at the back of the room.

“Not really,” Remus answered with surprise. “I don’t suppose it’s so that we can spend the rest of term refining our theses?”

“No. He does it so he can stay at his house in Gibraltar for an extra month.”

“Heavens. You’ve shocked me,” Remus deadpanned.

“Seventh-year students get the whole semester off to revise for their N.E.W.T.s. I can’t wait.”

“Damn. I suppose it’s too late now for me to turn my academic career around.”

Remus began to pack his things five minutes before the end of class. God, he had hated it when his students did that. As soon as the clock struck four he muttered a hasty goodbye and rose from his seat. Snape looked exasperated.

“Where are you going? We still need to work out a schedule for our lab work.”

“Oh. Sorry. Whatever you want to do is fine, just let me know. I’m open.”

“I thought you were good at making lists.”

“Lists, yes, not schedules. Really, I mean it, just point me where to go and I’ll show up. You’ll obviously be the brains of this operation.”

Snape kept frowning at him. Remus could practically see the gears grinding behind his eyes. “I’m

more than happy to do this project alone, Lupin, but don't expect to get any credit for it."

"That's not what I meant," Remus said, and suddenly he felt very old, unwilling to be prideful or defensive over such a trifling thing. "I just mean — I'm sure you have a lot of ideas, and they'll all be better than anything I could dream up. I don't want to get in the way of that. I'll just go along and help with whatever's needed." Remus really didn't have the energy to think about their project. He couldn't even remember what he and his partner had settled on the first time around. It had not been groundbreaking.

"Fine," said Snape, still seeming suspicious. "We'll talk about it at our next class."

"That's great," Remus said. "See you then." Remus was already making his way to the door. His friends were waiting to ambush him on the other side.

"Finally," James said, steering him bodily away from the classroom.

"Long fucking week," Remus sighed by way of agreement.

"It's Monday and you've been to one lesson," Peter pointed out helpfully.

"Language," Sirius said. "There are second-years about. That's got to be worth at least five points, don't you think?"

"I'm a fucking prefect, and I'll say what I bloody well please," Remus said, grinning.

"Ten points from Gryffindor!" Remus turned to see Lily Evans scowling at him.

"Sorry," Remus said, immediately changing his posture. If he were a wolf he'd be lying belly-up. "I deserved that. It was inappropriate." Lily said nothing, breezing past them.

"God, she's gorgeous when she gets angry," James sighed. "As long as she's not angry at me," he quickly amended.

"Does that mean you've finally worked out that pissing her off on purpose *isn't* the best way to get her attention?" Remus asked. He probably wouldn't have said it at fifteen, but he couldn't resist.

"Not exactly. It *is* the best way to get her attention. Just maybe not the kind of attention I'm after," James conceded.

"What a revelation," said Peter.

"Even I have my moments," James replied.

Sirius genially cuffed Remus on the shoulder. "Rotten luck, old boy, getting saddled with Snivellus this semester." Ah. Of course. They hadn't outgrown that yet.

"Rotten luck for you," Remus retorted. "You're just jealous I'm going to ace this project."

"Jealous. Sure. I don't know how I'm going to bear it."

"By the way, did you ever remember what it was? The thing you were trying to remember for class today?" Peter asked.

"The — oh. Well, either way, you've been no help at all, reminding me *now*," Remus laughed.

Later that evening, when he returned to the dorms, Remus delved into his trunk to find the leftover

Calming Draught he had brewed in January 1976. He took a surreptitious swig while he was changing into his pyjamas and settled in for what he hoped would be a restful night. *There*, he thought, *I've done it. I did everything better this time around. I've done the best I can.* He drifted off, dreaming of Teddy. Maybe next time he awoke, he would finally see his child again.

Chanel No. 5

He woke up at Hogwarts again the next morning, and the morning after that. This dream was starting to get tiresome. The day before the full moon, sure. The day after, that made sense too. Those two days, for better or for worse, had been crucial to his development as a person. The rest of the week? Not so much. With no earth-shattering trauma to kick it off, it was shaping up to be an incredibly average week, which meant that Remus had nothing to do but think. He ate, slept, cried, and occasionally lounged in the Prefects' Bath. He went to all his classes and only half attended to them, already having a firm grasp on the material. He was more interested in studying his surroundings, the faces and voices of people he'd long forgotten, and the younger faces and voices of people he still knew. He was constantly astonished at all the memories they dredged up. Remus was riding a pendulum of emotions, cycling relentlessly between grief and ecstasy. His wife was gone. His friends were here. Tonks. Sirius. Teddy. James. It was almost too much to bear. He routinely took pulls from his calming draught. It didn't make him any happier, but it made him less likely to dissolve into tears at inopportune moments.

Potions class provided a minor reprieve, an hour and a half where he was more or less too distracted to descend into despair. Their Wednesday session was once again focused on theory, along with a brush-up on experimental methodologies. Remus found it tedious, just like he had the first time around, but he figured he might as well try to learn something new. He spent quite a lot of time watching Snape take notes in impossibly tiny handwriting. Remus couldn't make out more than a few words here and there, but it became clear to him that Snape was not actually writing down what Slughorn said. Remus wondered what he was working on instead.

Two rows behind him, he heard Peter whisper, "Oi! Quit it!"

"Mr. Pettigrew!" Slughorn barked. "Something you'd like to share with the class?"

"No, sir," Peter mumbled. Remus risked turning around. Sirius, behind Peter, and James, in front of Peter, were both sniggering at something. Peter was looking put out. Remus had no idea what had happened, but he'd missed his window to catch the joke. He snapped his attention back to the front of the classroom. Not for the first time, Remus felt uneasy about Peter. He tried to force down the question that plagued him every time he looked at his old friend. *When had things begun to change? Did Peter already hate them, even then?* Unable to resist, Remus turned around again. From the second, third, and fourth rows James, Peter, and Sirius all smiled at him, lighting up like a series of beacons. No, it didn't seem possible, yet.

As he'd promised, Remus stayed behind after class to confer with Snape. He had resigned himself to the possibility that he might actually have to think about this project, if he didn't wake up first.

At least it would give him something to focus on.

Snape thrust a handwritten schedule under Remus' nose. "We'll meet Mondays and Wednesdays after class until lab ends at six o'clock. I don't want to work on Fridays. We'll find additional meeting times if necessary, but if you follow this plan to the letter we shouldn't have to."

"Sounds great," Remus said impassively. He recalled now that Professor Slughorn set aside a few hours each day for unsupervised lab time in the Potions classroom. Remus was fairly sure that Snape had discontinued this practice when he took over the position. Rather hypocritical, considering how much he himself had benefited from it, but Snape was never as openhanded with his students as Slughorn had been. The only other students who showed up that afternoon were a pair of third-year Ravenclaws who sat as far across the room as possible from Snape. "Have you decided what we're going to work on?" Remus asked.

"Yes. Something I've been toying with for some time. This assignment will give me a chance to finally perfect it."

"Isn't that a bit like cheating, to choose a project you were already working on?" Remus asked.

"Why, are you going to tell Slughorn?"

"No."

"Then I don't see why it matters. You should be thanking me."

"All right. Thank you," Remus said. Snape gave him an odd look. "So what's it going to be?"

"A potion of my own invention." Snape reached into his satchel and pulled out a jar containing something clear and sparkly. "My most recent trial. The, ah, consistency isn't quite right yet." If Remus didn't know better, he'd say Snape looked embarrassed by that admission. "Hold out your hand," Snape instructed. Remus obeyed. "The one that's *not* covered in bandages." Remus swapped to his right hand. Snape opened the jar and dumped the glittery blob into Remus' palm. Remus poked it. The indent stayed.

"Neat. You made Silly Putty." Snape glared at him. Remus squeezed the blob in his hand and immediately started coughing as a blast of fragrance assaulted his nose.

Snape dove for his notebook and quill. "What do you smell?" he asked eagerly.

"Chanel No. 5. It's what my mother used to wear. Excuse me, what's so funny about that?"

"Nothing." Snape waved a hand dismissively and continued writing. "Do you notice anything else?"

"No. Is that how it's supposed to smell?"

"After a fashion." Snape put down the quill and looked up at Remus. "I call it Pseudoamortentia."

"Pseudo?" Remus asked. "In what way?"

"It's meant to emulate the sensory qualities of Amortentia, without having any compulsory effect on the drinker."

"A placebo?"

"If you like."

“Fascinating. What’s the point, exactly?”

“The same as any placebo. Experimental control. There’s been a lot of debate over the years about how exactly Amortentia operates on the mind. A convincing placebo could open the door to all kinds of new research.”

“That makes sense. Gosh, you really are on another level, aren’t you? I mean that as a compliment.” Remus continued to knead the putty in his hands. “I agree you’ve a ways to go in terms of appearance, though.”

“*We* have a ways to go, Lupin,” Snape corrected. “I told you, I’m not about to carry your weight in this project. The viscosity should be a fairly easy fix. The thing I want to prioritise now is the scent. Most people who smell Amortentia report a blend of three to four distinct fragrances. That’s not to say that there are only three to four layers involved; that just seems to be the number of scents that an average subject has the capacity to distinguish at one time. Right now, I have a concoction that smells of one thing very strongly, which tells me I’m on the right path.”

“I see,” Remus said. He suddenly got the joke. “It’s not an Oedipal thing, just for your information.”

Snape raised his eyebrows. “As a researcher, it’s not my place to judge what subjects report. So what if I smell vanilla, and you smell your mother — I’m *sure* there’s no deeper meaning to it,” he said with a smirk.

“Ha, ha. I assume you’ve already got some ideas about what to try next?”

“Yes.”

There was an expectant pause that stretched on too long. “Will you explain them to me?” Remus prompted.

“Perhaps. Will you pay attention?”

“Yes! I’m very interested,” Remus said. “You can even check my notes after.” So, Snape launched into an overview of the experimentation he had done to date and his planned course of action for their next session. Remus dutifully wrote it all down, interrupting occasionally to ask for clarification. When they were finished, Remus mulled over his notes. Something was dawning on him; something that profoundly unnerved him. “This all makes sense to me,” he said. “I didn’t know any of this before.”

“Obviously. That’s why I explained it to you.”

“No, but — never mind. Thanks so much. That was really helpful.” Remus picked up the Pseudoamortentia and gave it another squeeze, then threw it splat against the table. “You could market this, you know. Smelly Putty.”

“Right. We’ll resume next Monday,” Snape said, cutting off any further conversation.

“See you then,” Remus said, watching Snape pack up and leave. Remus continued to sit there for a while, lost in thought. It was a puzzle, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to find the answer. At last he drew on his inner reserve of courage and pulled a N.E.W.T.-level text from one of the cases lining the wall. He skimmed it and found a potion he had never heard of before. He read through the ingredients and brewing instructions. It seemed doable, if time consuming. He flipped to the beginning of *Chapter 7: Potions Affecting the Human Reproductive System*, a subject with which he was entirely unfamiliar. He read the introductory essays on theory and ethics. The writing was

dry as dust, but it made sense. *It all made sense.* Remus snapped the textbook closed, heart pounding.

“Oh, I’m sorry, my boy, did I startle you?” Remus hadn’t even noticed Slughorn entering the room.

“A bit. Sorry,” Remus said, to account for his skittishness.

“Time to close up shop, I’m afraid. Lab time’s over for the day.” Slughorn drew closer to see what Remus had been reading. “Ah, yes, *Potions and the Human Anatomy*. It’s rather an antique now, but it withstands the test of time. It’s good to see you taking the initiative, Lupin.”

“Thank you, sir,” Remus said meekly. He left in a daze.

Remus ignored his growling stomach and went straight to the library. He wandered without direction through the stacks, picking out books at random and reading bits and pieces of each. There was so much knowledge packed into the Hogwarts library. *So much knowledge. More than you could learn in a hundred lifetimes.* By the time he’d been at it for nearly two hours, he was starting to hyperventilate. He had to stop, at least long enough to get back to the dorm and take his calming draught.

“You missed supper,” James said as soon as Remus entered the room.

“I’m not hungry,” Remus lied. He went straight to his bed and closed the drapes. He cast a faint *lumos* and stared up at the broken-legged goose.

He tried to think about earlier dreams; dreams where he had read books, gone to the theatre, listened to music that had never been written. They always seemed to make sense in the moment, but seconds later, he could no longer recall the words or melodies. He knew he wasn’t *really* composing novels in his sleep. His mind was just filling in the gaps, giving him the general impression of having read something.

This was different. Everything was crystal sharp. He had spent the evening reading comprehensive, coherent texts on subjects he knew nothing about. He could recall the details with perfect clarity. Perhaps it was still an illusion, an impression; but even in his most elaborate dreams he had never constructed a fantasy like this.

He had also never had a dream that covered every minute detail of four days and nights.

It was still possible, he reminded himself. Time worked strangely in dreams. Dreams created memories of things that never happened. What felt like four days could have passed in the span of an hour. He had experienced a terrible trauma, had come very near to dying from what little he could gather. He had, perhaps, never before descended to such profound depths of unconsciousness.

Perhaps. Or perhaps he wasn’t dreaming at all.

This one kind of is about cake

Remus' birthday came as a surprise to him, but his friends were determined to make a show of his turning sixteen. They seemed confused at how hilarious Remus found this to be.

Remus had no idea how old he should count himself, really. Did he add the time passed here to the thirty-eight-odd years he had already lived? Or was he sixteen because his present body had existed for sixteen years? Perhaps he should just restart the clock from when he'd woken up in Gryffindor back in February. In that case, he was just shy of a month old. That idea amused him. Maybe he needed more sleep.

His laughter dried up at the sight of his father's old brown owl, Mabel, swooping toward him at the breakfast table. Remus reached out his arm for her to perch, watching her with wonder. Unexpected tears welled in his eyes. He petted and preened her while she closed her eyes in apparent contentment. He fed her a sausage off his own plate. He never wanted to let her fly off again. He was so busy fussing over Mabel that he nearly forgot to take the missive attached to her outstretched leg.

Remus opened the envelope with trembling fingers. He was afraid that his friends would notice how overcome he was, but they seemed utterly incurious. This was all perfectly normal. It would be strange if Remus *didn't* get a card on his birthday. He opened the card. There was a £10 note tucked inside, which Remus quickly palmed into his pocket. For reasons he couldn't quite explain, he felt averse to letting his friends know about the meagre cache of muggle currency tucked away in the lining of his trunk. His *just-in-case* fund. The banknote told him which of his parents had actually sealed and sent the envelope. Remus stared at the signature on the card until the image seared into the back of his eyelids. *Thinking about you every day. Love, Mum & Dad.* Globes of tears were spilling from his eyes now, and he couldn't seem to stop them.

"You all right? Did something happen?" James whispered beside him, all earnest concern.

"No. It's not bad news or anything. I just — excuse me." Remus got up and dashed to the nearest lavatory. Once there he locked himself into a stall, cast *silencio* on himself, and began heaving with sobs. He remembered the card. He had kept it for several years, carried it from place to place until eventually it had disappeared or disintegrated during one of his many moves. He was glad, after his mother died, to have saved all the cards she sent him at school. But his mother wasn't dead, yet. He'd forgotten. How was it possible that he had forgotten?

God help him, would his own child ever forget him that way?

Thinking about you every day. He knew in his bones that his mother had meant it. Did he think about Teddy every day? He was certain that he did. Moment to moment, a thousand little things reminded him of his child. And yet there was a sliver of doubt in his mind, and a sliver was more than enough to send him into paroxysms of guilt. Every day was not enough. Once an hour was not enough. Every heartbeat, every second he spent idling in the past was a second not devoted to finding his way back to Teddy. Betrayal heaped upon betrayal. The terrible thought, the *very worst thought*, arose again. *What if there were no Teddy to get back to?* Remus screamed with the full force of his lungs, silently drowning it out.

"Poor petal. Oh, you poor, poor boy. You've got it awfully bad, haven't you?"

Remus jerked his head up, disoriented. He smeared the tears out of his eyes. Moaning Myrtle was leaning against the top of the stall door, arms resting over the edge in mock corporeality. "It's

nothing,” Remus said reflexively.

Myrtle cocked her head and pointed at her trachea. “I’m not half bad at lip reading, but I promise you there’s no one else around,” she said. Remus ended the silencing spell. “Doesn’t look like nothing to me, but who am I to judge? Go ahead and take some of that potion you keep in your pocket. No shame in that.”

Remus took a sip of the calming draught. He always forgot he had it on him when he needed it most.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” Myrtle asked. “I’m very discreet.”

“I really don’t,” Remus answered.

“Suit yourself.” Myrtle backed up and did a little somersault. “But for what it’s worth, you’re not the first boy I’ve seen in this state.”

“No. I won’t be the last, either.”

Myrtle drew up close to him and scanned his face. Remus looked to the side, uncomfortable. “Something’s changed. I’ve been watching you. You’re different to how you used to be,” Myrtle said.

“Changed? I don’t know what you mean,” Remus said nervously.

“You seem sadder,” Myrtle said, as if that cleared things up. Remus tried to protest. He’d only cried in the loo seven, eight times, tops. “Not because of all the crying,” Myrtle clarified. “It’s your eyes. Your eyes seem sadder now. *Forlorn*.” Myrtle broke into a wistful sigh. “You’ve got very nice eyes, you know.”

That seemed like Remus’ cue to leave. “I have to get to class. Err, thanks for the chat.” He ducked out of the stall.

“Any time. You know where to find me,” Myrtle cooed. *No, you know where to find me.* Remus realised a moment too late that perhaps he had encouraged her by saying ‘thank you’.

James was leaning on the wall outside the lavatory. How had he — *Right.* The Map. “Hey Moony,” James said softly. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Remus said. The calming draught had kicked in. “Just lamenting the loss of my youth.”

“It’s true, you’re ancient now.” James shoved him gently. “But seriously. What happened?”

Remus took a steadying breath. He was going to have to tell James something. “Fine. But you can’t tell anyone else, all right?”

“I’ll decide that once you tell me.”

“I miss my mum,” Remus said.

“Yeah?” James frowned in confusion.

“That’s it. I miss my mum, and I’m embarrassed because sixteen-year-olds aren’t supposed to cry in the loo about missing their mums, so if we can end this conversation and never bring it up again that would be great, all right?”

“Oh.” James looked relieved. He threw an arm around Remus’ shoulders. “Nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all. But... I won’t tell Sirius, don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” Remus suspected this was as much for Sirius’ sake as his own, but he still appreciated it.

“I’ll just tell him you were puking.”

“Lovely. Cheers.” Remus sighed, thankful that he had been agile enough to avoid any further interrogation. It was only later that he realised he’d done nothing but tell the truth.

Halfway through the day, Remus remembered that he’d forgotten to beg off his late afternoon lab session with Snape. He hadn’t even thought about it, as that day’s Potions lesson had been cancelled to afford the students more ‘reading hours.’ Remus didn’t much mind either way, but his friends were almost comically dismayed when he told them. They couldn’t fathom why Remus wouldn’t agree to just leave Snape in the lurch. All Remus said was, “Easy for you to say. I still have to work with him for the rest of the month.”

Even so, Remus was fifteen minutes late to his meeting with Snape. Snape, who had already set up and started something brewing in the cauldron, glared daggers at him. “Sorry,” Remus said. “It’s my birthday.”

“I fail to see what that has to do with your timekeeping skills.”

“Oh, everything. I was born ten days late, so you’ve got nothing on my mum.” Remus sat down and began to retrieve his things, unhurried and unbothered. “I was supposed to be a Leap Day baby, actually. Imagine that. I would have turned four years old this year.” Remus peered into the cauldron. “All right, don’t try to tell me you only started that a quarter of an hour ago.”

“No. I took advantage of the extra time we had today, which you might have done too if you’d given it any forethought.”

“Well then, I’m sorry for not inferring clairvoyantly that I was supposed to meet you early,” Remus said. Snape continued to scowl. “The mixture’s looking a bit runny today. Very pungent, though. Any progress on the scent question?”

“Yes,” Snape said, becoming more animated. “I didn’t want to say before, in case I couldn’t procure any in time, but I’ve been working on a hunch for the past few weeks.” Snape reached across the table for a pretty tortoiseshell box and gently pried it open, revealing a lump of something grey and waxy-looking. “Ambergris,” he said with evident pride. “It’s very expensive,” he added patronisingly.

“So I’ve heard. You must have really buttered up old Slughorn to get your hands on this.”

“He was persuaded by the merits of my research,” Snape answered, which wasn’t a denial.

“Colour me impressed. So, you think the ambergris will make up for leaving out the pearl powder?”

“If my hunch is correct, yes.”

Remus reflected on this. “Ambergris, pearl powder... Odd how many precious ingredients come from sea creatures with gastrointestinal distress.”

Snape snorted. “If that bothers you, you’re not ready to hear about where castoreum comes from.” He began paring tiny flakes from the ambergris. Remus pulled a face.

“Are we still using castoreum alongside the ambergris?” Remus asked.

“I think so. As you know, castoreum is added to Amortentia to carry and enhance the fragrances produced by the other ingredients. I thought it might be sufficient on its own, but that hasn’t proven to be the case.” Snape checked the clock. “We’ll add the ambergris to the mixture in eighteen minutes.”

“Got it.” Remus sat and tried to look busy for several minutes. He watched Snape assiduously writing notes. He seemed to be always writing something down when Remus was near him. Remus remembered suddenly that Snape had been partnered with James for this project, the first time around. Just the thought of it made his stomach twist. He couldn’t recall what kind of potion they had worked on, but it certainly hadn’t been Pseudoamortentia. Remus doubted they had spent more than ten cumulative minutes actually working together. They had only produced a final product out of a deep and mutual unwillingness to fail the course.

“You’re quite unusual, you know,” Remus said. Snape stiffened, and Remus knew immediately that he had said the wrong thing. “Coming up with this project,” he continued smoothly, pretending not to notice. “It’s quite an unusual choice for a fifth-year.”

“How so?” Snape asked, still tense.

“Well, putting aside the fact that Amortentia isn’t covered until N.E.W.T. levels, and you’re already working out something derived from it... I was just thinking, most people would choose something with more obvious practical applications.”

“I thought I was clear about the practical applications for Pseudoamortentia.”

“No — sorry, this isn’t coming out right at all. I just think that most O.W.L.-level students are going to make something they could imagine using in their everyday lives. You, you’ve got an eye to the future. You’re making something that other researchers can build on.”

“I’m making something that *I* can build on,” Snape corrected. “We’re not going to be in school forever, Lupin.”

“Oh, believe me, I know that. Look, I’m trying to praise you, but I’ll shut up if you’d rather I didn’t.”

“Two more minutes. Put your finger under your jaw. Can you feel your pulse?”

“Err, yes. I should hope so.”

“Good. You’re going to whisk while I add the ambergris. Clockwise, one rotation for each pulse, until I tell you to stop. It’s very important that you keep in time. Do you think you can do that?”

“I think so,” Remus said, practicing the motion in the air. Unhelpfully, his pulse began to speed up when he thought about ruining the potion.

“Begin.” Remus stirred while Snape painstakingly added the ambergris, one flake at a time. Each flake released a little puff of silvery steam as it hit the liquid base. “Stop,” Snape called out after two minutes. Remus put the whisk down and Snape covered the cauldron. “Now we let it simmer.” He turned to look at Remus. “You have a very fast heart rate. You should probably get that checked out.”

“Thanks. I’ll bear that in mind.” Remus leaned back in his chair. “The colour looks a lot closer this week. What did you use to turn it opaque?”

“Cornflour.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. It’s completely inert; it only alters the colour and consistency of the mixture.”

“So we’ve gone from Silly Putty to instant custard.”

“Well, it’s an improvement, isn’t it?” Snape was frowning. “The main problem with its appearance is that it lacks iridescence, which is a defining characteristic of Amortentia.”

“From the powdered pearl, right?”

“Not exactly. Most of the lustre goes away as the pearl dissolves in the honey vinegar. It actually comes from the opal dust. Have you *still* not read up on true Amortentia?”

“Oh. I swear I have, I just forgot that part. And you’re sure we can’t just sprinkle some opal dust into this?”

Snape looked at him in alarm. “Are you *mad*?” he exclaimed.

“No. Erm, just checking.” Remus made a mental note to find out what opal dust did. He dipped his pen in ink and wrote ‘*lustre*’ on his forearm.

Finally it came time to remove the lid from the cauldron. Snape urged Remus to go first. Remus slipped on a leather mitt and carefully lifted the covering while Snape stood several feet away, notebook in hand. He was completely unprepared for the powerful surge of smells that crashed into him. “Bloomin’ heck!” he cried out. “That’s definitely more than four scents.”

“List whatever you can.”

“Still got the perfume. Pine sap. Cloves. Old books. I don’t know, I’m getting dizzy.” There was something else, something overpowering that he couldn’t say out loud. It smelled like Tonks. He wanted to imagine it as something delicate, like her shampoo, or her laundry detergent, but he knew it was a purely human odour; it smelled like her sweat. Remus wanted to run out of the room.

“That’s only four,” Snape pointed out.

“I also smell... lanolin? And woodsmoke. And melted butter.” He struggled to identify another distinctive fragrance, one that cut inharmoniously across all the rest. When it hit him, he burst into hysterical laughter.

“What? Why are you laughing?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. I think I’m just getting giddy off the fumes.”

“Perhaps you have a keener sense of smell than the average test subject.”

“I doubt that,” Remus said sharply. “Come smell it for yourself.”

Snape approached the table with an expression of great concentration. He began to take more notes. Remus realised, with mild disappointment, that Snape wasn’t going to tell him what he smelled. After pausing for a moment with his quill in midair and a scowl on his face, Snape said, “Lupin. Are you wearing cologne?”

“No, just deodorant.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s very disagreeable. It’s impinging on the fragrance of the potion.”

“Oh. I’ll just go stand in the corner then, shall I?” Remus actually did, mostly to give his overtaxed mind a brief respite. He waited for Snape to cover the cauldron and finish jotting down observations before he returned to the workstation. The smell still hung in the air, but it was more manageable now. “I’d say your hunch was right,” Remus offered. “That did the trick.”

“Yes, but you did have a point. The odour shouldn’t be that strong. We’ll have to fiddle with the ratios of castoreum and ambergris.”

“Can’t wait,” Remus said cheerfully.

Remus giggled all the way back to Gryffindor. For the first time since his arrival, he found himself wishing he could speak to Severus Snape the adult. Severus was probably the only other person that would find the humour in it, even if he wouldn’t show it. Wolfsbane. Remus’ version of Amortentia smelled of Wolfsbane Potion. It was just about the most repulsive smell in the world as far as he was concerned, yet there it was, striking a clear note alongside all his other dearest sensory memories. It made perfect sense logically, of course. Wolfsbane Potion *did* have an enormously positive effect on his psyche. Still, it was very, very funny. It was a bit like cutting into a beautiful layer cake and finding manure at the bottom.

Speaking of beautiful cakes, Remus was greeted by a Black Forest gâteau when he returned to the Gryffindor common room. This only made him laugh harder. His friends had secreted away an entire picnic dinner for him, and since the weather was foul, they ate it on the floor of their dormitory with fluffy conjured clouds and cheery lights circling above their heads. James put on a Cat Stevens album. Remus privately enjoyed his renewed ability to sit cross-legged on the floor without pain. A picnic was the perfect birthday gift. After an exhausting day, Remus had been dreading the noise and bustle of the Great Hall. Now he finally felt at ease for the first time in — who could say?

“By the by, which night is the full moon?” Sirius asked, because apparently Remus couldn’t just *have* his little moment of enjoyment.

“This coming Monday.”

“Oh, that’s good, because we’ve got plans Saturday evening.” Sirius had that look on his face, his lips twitching upward in anticipation. Whatever he was about to reveal, he was clearly very pleased with himself. Eager to see their reactions.

“Do we?” Remus played along.

“Yes. We’ve got an invite to the party at Ravenclaw Tower. You’re welcome.”

Remus smiled in spite of himself, seeing how excited his friends were. He had a vague memory of the event, only because it was the first time they had ever gained access to an exclusive seventh-year party. He thought maybe that had been the occasion upon which he’d first tried cannabis. It hadn’t been stellar; he’d just fallen asleep on the floor. Then again, maybe that had happened in sixth year. It was hard to say. Remus half-listened as his friends gossiped about who would be at the party (and, more importantly, who *wasn’t* invited). He was far more attentive to the cadence of their voices than to the words they were saying. He sat quietly and savoured the last of his cake.

Lustre

Saturday evening, Remus felt more anxious than he'd expected or planned for. Not only was he about to relive the mortifying experience of attending his first student party, but when he cast his mind back, he had no idea when he had last attended a party of any description. As to this sort of party, the sort where people played loud music and drank to excess and slunk off into corners less secluded than they thought, it had been the better part of two decades. Remus felt simultaneously too young and too old to go through with it. It was very disorienting.

His friends were obviously anxious too, though they showed it in different ways; overthinking and over-preparing. Sirius practically begged Remus to accept one of his collared shirts, but Remus, having no desire to be Pygmalioned that evening, stuck to jeans, trainers, and a plain blue t-shirt. He chose blue out of a desire to blend in with the furnishings.

When they arrived at Ravenclaw Tower, a rather harried fellow fifth year was standing by to let them into the common room — no doubt working upon the promise of being admitted later on. Remus wondered how many riddles the poor boy would be obliged to answer that night before he finally got his reward. Upon entry they were greeted with shots of something blue and fizzy, which Remus readily accepted, eager to forge ahead through the most nerve-wracking part of the evening. He also accepted the next two mixed drinks that came his way, along with a dubious-looking hash brownie that must have been concocted in someone's dorm. He only slowed his pace when he noticed James watching him with concern. Right. Perhaps he *was* behaving a bit unlike his usual self.

Remus recognised the true extent of his miscalculation when he stood up to find the loo and was slammed all at once by the full force of his inebriation. He'd thought he felt fine while he was still sitting down. Now his head was swimming. Of *course* his slight adolescent body had no tolerance for alcohol. Had he ever even tried drinking spirits before? *Stupid*.

At least he wasn't nervous anymore; he didn't have the capacity. When he returned to sit with his friends, he found that everything was suddenly very, very funny. They made such an awkward group, the four of them huddled at the periphery of the room, talking amongst themselves while looking over each other's shoulders. James and Sirius were obviously desperate to ingratiate themselves with the upperclassmen, but even Sirius seemed reluctant to break away from the bubble of security afforded by the presence of his friends. They all seemed to be waiting for someone else to come over and initiate conversation. Rescue them. Remus pictured an invisible fishing line extending from Sirius to the centre of the room. The line was slack; no one was biting.

As a child, Remus had seen his friends as unshakeably cool and self-confident. Now he understood that they had only been marginally better at faking it than himself.

Then Remus spotted someone interesting across the room: a tall seventh-year Ravenclaw sitting off on her own, perched on a ledge and blowing cigarette smoke out the open window. She looked a bit like a young Jane Fonda, adorned with magnificently long loose hair, thick winged eyeliner and a full-sleeved mini dress. What caught Remus' eye, however, was that she was *shimmering*. Literally. Her face was tilted at just the right angle to refract the light from the sconces. Remus looked down at his arm, where the word '*lustre*' was still faintly visible. He looked back up at the girl, struggling to refocus until there was only one of her again. Wordlessly, he rose to his feet and began to walk toward her like a moth drawn to flame, ignoring the questioning noises his friends were making. "Hi," Remus said. "I like your face."

The girl glanced at him and then turned back to the window. She took a drag from her cigarette. "I have a boyfriend," she said on the exhale. She had a husky voice and a posh drawl. Why couldn't Remus remember who she was? She seemed like exactly the sort of person he would have been infatuated with at sixteen.

"Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I meant — I like your makeup. It's very chic."

The girl turned back to him, infinitesimally relaxing her posture. She looked him up and down, telegraphing that she was sizing him up. It was an impressive power move. "Are you queer or something?" she asked.

"Yes," Remus said.

She took another excruciatingly long drag while staring into his face. "Right on," she said at last. "Thanks. I make it myself."

"Really? So you're an artist. That's cool."

She shrugged, but Remus could tell she was pleased. "I paint sometimes," she said.

"What do you use to get that glimmer effect?" Remus asked. "It's spectacular."

"I mix my own pigments."

"Fascinating." Remus was staring at her lips, which were dusted with an extra-lush coating of glitter. "I assume it's not toxic, then."

"Well, yeah. I'm not thick. Suffering for beauty is *so* passé." She stubbed her glittery cigarette on the window ledge and vanished the end.

"Of course," Remus grinned. "Sorry, I hope I'm not monopolising your time. I'm just really interested in what you do. I've actually been looking for the right thing to produce that exact effect."

"You an artist too, then?"

"Sort of. I'm a complete novice, though. As you can tell from all the questions."

She smiled at him. "Would you like to see where I work?"

"I would, very much."

“Come on, then.” She led him to the seventh-year girls’ dormitory. (This was how it had been for a time, after Women’s Lib and before the Thatcher years when the reactionary Board of Governors decided to refortify the dormitories with gender-specific magic.) The candles lit as they entered the room. Each bed seemed to have much more space around it than those in the Gryffindor dorms; space for bookcases, desks, or easels. There was a psychedelic abstract propped on the easel. Several vibrant paintings were pinned to the wall beside her bed, showing various stages of artistic development. The girl moved to her workspace and picked up a jar. “Mica powder. It’s what I use for shimmer,” she explained, pointing to her lips.

Remus examined her impressive collection of pigments and paint pots. “Where do you get all this from?”

“Mail order, from a muggle catalogue. It comes from an art supply shop in Glasgow.”

“How long does it usually take to arrive?”

“About three weeks, as long as there’s no delay. It *always* gets held up in Muggle Post Customs at Hogsmeade. It’s such a drag.”

“Damn. I need it much sooner than that,” Remus said.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “You have a time-sensitive need for glitter?”

“Yes, actually. It’s — it’s for a gift I’m trying to put together,” Remus said, thinking on his wobbly feet.

“A gift. That’s sweet. For a fella?”

“Erm, sure.”

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t help you out.”

“Actually, maybe you can. Would ten quid be enough to replace it? I don’t have the money on me, it’s back at my dorm, but I can get it to you tomorrow.”

“Ten quid? For a half-empty pot of sparkles?” she asked incredulously. *Fuck*. He’d forgotten about inflation. “It’s your money, I guess.” She shrugged and handed him the jar. “You must be more of a perfectionist than I am.”

“This is great. Thanks ever so much. Like I said, I’ll pay you back tomorrow.” Remus shrank the jar down and slipped it into the pocket of his jeans.

“Fine, but hide it in a book or something. Last thing I need is some Slytherin bitch seeing me take cash from an underclassman. There are enough nasty rumours about me going around as it is. What’s your name, by the way? So I can hunt you down if you don’t follow through?”

“Remus Lupin. Gryffindor. What’s yours?”

“Moonbeam.”

“No it’s not,” Remus said, eyes wide. “You’re having me on.” Her face was glowing, blurring in the dim light.

“Well, it doesn’t say that on my passport, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Right. Sorry. That was rude of me. It’s just — never mind.”

“Come with me. I want to show you something.” She led him to her bed, extinguished the candles, and drew the curtains. Then she cast a wordless variation on *lumos* that made her wand glow with ultraviolet light. The canopy lit up with a patchwork of fluorescent paintings.

“Groovy,” Remus breathed. “If people still say that. Not sure anymore. Say, can you teach me that trick?”

They both lay back on the bed, staring up at the patterns that contorted and meandered pleasantly before Remus’ intoxicated gaze. Moonbeam let her wand arm drop to her side. Remus listened to her breathing in the quiet space. Suddenly she rolled on top of him, kissing him. Remus responded with alacrity.

She pulled back. “I thought you were queer,” she said accusingly.

“I am. Some of us like both,” Remus replied.

“Oh. Right on.” She kissed him again, with tongue this time.

“I thought you had a boyfriend,” Remus said.

“He lives in London,” she said dismissively. They resumed a third time. It felt absolutely glorious; Remus hadn’t realised how starved for touch he was. He clawed both of his hands into the mattress. Moonbeam’s hair fell around him in a heavy cascade. Her mini dress was *so* mini. He could almost feel the fabric hiking up as she pressed her body close to his, and oh, God, he was about to come in his trousers like a goddamned — like a — *like a* —

He squirmed away from the kiss. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Eighteen. You?”

“Erm — sixteen, at the moment. I’m sorry, I can’t do this. You’re so lovely. It’s just — you’re a bit young for me, is all.”

She sat back, straddling his thighs, and laughed. “You’re funny, Remus Lupin.” She got up, relit the candles, and straightened her clothes. They returned to the common room.

Remus rejoined James and Sirius, who were openly gawking at him. Peter had apparently gone off to bed already. “What the *fuck*, Moony?” Sirius whispered.

James swatted Sirius. “Don’t call him that here. But seriously, what the fuck?”

“What?” Remus asked, feigning innocence.

“Would you care to tell us what the hell you said over there to pull the hottest girl in school?” Sirius pressed.

“Oh, her? She was just showing me some of her work. She’s a painter.”

“Oh, she showed you her work, did she?” Sirius echoed, leering. As that sentence didn’t actually mean anything, Remus chose not to dignify it with an answer.

“Look what she taught me to do,” Remus said, pulling out his wand and producing a tiny orb of blacklight. “Neat, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” said James. “Bet that’s not all she taught you to do... with your wand...”

“Give it a rest. She has a boyfriend.” Unfortunately, Remus failed to keep from sounding a *little* smug as he said it. Damn it. Teenage Brain was asserting itself again.

“Right,” Sirius said. “My mistake. Silly me. By the way, if that’s the story you’re sticking to, you might want to wipe all that glitter from your mouth.”

The Ravenclaw table was rather sparsely occupied the following morning. Remus looked about for Moonbeam, but he didn’t recognise her until she caught his eye and nodded at him. What Remus wouldn’t have given for that kind of public acknowledgement when he was younger! Remus approached her. She looked different with her face scrubbed and her hair pulled back in a conservative plait. She had dark circles under her eyes. *Now* Remus recognised her, but only as a face in the background from his school years. They had never interacted. “I found that book you were asking about. You can keep it if you like,” he said, handing over *Herbology for Hobbyists, Second Edition*. He had no qualms about playing the besotted puppy-dog if it would help her maintain her reputation. She thanked him perfunctorily and turned back to her friends.

“What did she say?” Sirius asked hungrily when Remus returned to the Gryffindor table.

“She told me to piss off,” Remus said.

“Bad luck, mate,” said James, clapping him on the shoulder. “Flew too close to the sun, first time out.”

“‘Tis better to have made love and lost, and all that,” Sirius added. Remus stacked more waffles onto his plate. He loved waffle Sundays.

Remus still had one more errand that morning. He waited until he was certain Snape was leaving the Great Hall by himself, then got up to follow after him. “I know, I know,” Remus said to his friends. “Potions project. It’s got to be done. I won’t be a minute.”

Remus hurried into the corridor after Snape. “Hello there,” he called, “do you have a moment?”

“Do I have a choice?” Snape replied.

“I just came to tell you that I won’t be able to stay after class tomorrow. I’m awfully sorry. I’ve got another obligation. I should have planned ahead.”

Remus braced himself for hostility — or worse, questions — but Snape only shrugged and said, “I’ll see you Wednesday, then.”

“You’re not angry?” Remus asked nervously.

“Why, should I be? It makes no difference to me. In fact, it frees up more time to revise for the O.W.L.s. Alone.”

“Oh. Well, good, then. Erm, I brought you something to make up for it, though.” Remus didn’t miss the way Snape tensed as he reached into his pocket. He hurriedly thrust the pot of mica powder into Snape’s hands. “I’ve no idea if it will work, but it seemed like a great idea at the time. Sorry.”

Snape held the jar up to the light, eyes narrowed. "I'll have to look into it."

"Great. Well then, have a nice Sunday." Remus bounded back to his seat in the Great Hall. The other students had mostly cleared out by then. "Do you have anywhere else to be right now?" he asked his friends. "Because I could murder another waffle, or three, or four."

Side Effects

Wednesday after the full moon, Remus looked forward — cautiously — to his lab session with Snape. His nerves quickly dissolved into disappointment when, instead of setting up a cauldron, Snape pulled two stoppered vials of iridescent white liquid out of his pocket. “I think this is it,” he said, with what could only be described as excitement. “It looks right, don’t you think?”

“I think so.” Remus twirled the vial around and around, watching the liquid swirl and shimmer. It was beautiful. He felt oddly heavy. “When did you do this?”

“Monday afternoon.”

“Oh. I thought you were going to revise for your O.W.L.s. on Monday.”

Snape shrugged. “I felt like working on this instead. You were actually onto something with the mica dust. It seems to have done the trick.”

“Was I?”

Snape smirked. “You really had no idea what you were doing, did you?”

“Well, I had a *little* bit of an idea. Give me some credit.”

“I was sceptical at first. Mica itself is mostly a filler ingredient, but it’s rarely used because it can carry trace minerals that might cause unintended effects. That’s why I didn’t think of it myself. But since the powder you brought me is synthetic — lab-grown by muggles — in theory it shouldn’t carry the same risk.”

“How very interesting. Tell me, how were you able to craft the potion without my help? I was under the impression it was a two-person job.”

“It is, but I didn’t need to brew an entirely new batch to add the mica. I just dumped it into our last sample and shook it up. I diluted it a bit as well, which seems to have solved the scent problem.”

“Oh. I see.” That didn’t sound very rigorous at all. “So, what’s next?”

“We drink.”

Remus blinked several times before he realised that Snape was talking about drinking the potion, not going for a celebratory pint at the Three Broomsticks. “Why do we have to drink it?”

“To make sure it’s truly inert. You should never administer a potion you’re not willing to take yourself — excepting poisons, of course. I already tried it on Monday, so I don’t anticipate anything happening.”

Remus eyed the bottle doubtfully. “There’s no chance at all it will act as a love potion, right?”

“No — God, Lupin, have you paid attention *once* this whole month? It doesn’t share a single aphrodisiac ingredient with true Amortentia. But just because it’s not a love potion, doesn’t mean it can’t make you drowsy, or dizzy, or some other unforeseen effect. So... drink up.”

Lupin uncorked his vial. He still detected all the same scents as before, but they were milder now. He downed the contents and waited. Nothing felt different, except that the smell rather stirred up his already simmering emotions. “Nothing so far,” he said.

“Good,” Snape said. “Same with me. Pay close attention and see if you notice anything off in the next forty-eight hours, but we should be in the clear.”

“Splendid. So, that’s it then?”

“Yes,” Snape said, looking pleased. “We’ve still got a fortnight until the Easter holiday, which leaves us plenty of time to put together our final report and presentation. We can work on that separately, though.”

“Great.” Remus, to his horror, felt himself tearing up. Good Lord, he’d thought he had mostly gotten a grip on his spontaneous weeping habit. He hoped Snape wouldn’t notice.

No such luck. Snape’s eyes widened as if in panic. “What is it? What are you experiencing?” He reached for his notebook.

“It’s not the potion,” Remus said sharply. He couldn’t explain it. He wasn’t crying because of anything that had happened — at least, not yet. He was crying because sixteen-year-old Severus Snape was sitting before him, hopeful and enthusiastic in his own peculiar way, making plans for the future. He was crying because he had trusted Severus with his life, and Severus had betrayed them all. No, wait, he was crying because Severus had *not* betrayed them, but he couldn’t quite parse how or why; he only had a garbled memory of what Harry had told him after the battle. He was crying because he felt the weight of the world and all time and space on his feeble shoulders. He was absolutely NOT crying over something as silly as —

“It’s just, when we started this assignment you said you weren’t going to carry my weight, so why are you making me *feel* like a dead weight? Every single important change you’ve made has been when I wasn’t around, and now you’ve gone and finished the whole project when you *knew* I couldn’t be there to help.”

Snape stared at his notes. “Right. Possible side effect: visible agitation immediately upon consumption.”

“For fuck’s sake, Severus, it’s not a *side effect*, it’s called having feelings.” A second-year sitting at the back of the lab yelped in surprise. “Sorry,” Remus called out quickly, “I meant fudge. Ten points from Gryffindor for me.”

“Feelings,” Snape repeated, still frowning at the page in front of him.

“Yes. I’m agitated because I *feel* rotten, and if you’re observing agitation in yourself, it might be because you actually *feel* guilty about it.”

Snape set down the notebook. “You’re angry with me,” he said.

“No, I’m *not*, I’m — well, fine, I guess I am a bit angry, but only because I feel hurt.”

“Hurt.” Snape seemed to be scanning the room for something else to stare at; he settled upon a purple stain on the floor. “You’re hurt because I didn’t include you in more of the process.” He said this as if it were new information, and not something Remus had just explained.

“Yes,” Remus said.

“I was not aware you wanted to be included.”

“Everyone wants to feel useful, Severus,” said Remus, suddenly feeling very tired.

"It was not my intention to make you feel that way," Snape said painstakingly.

"I think the word you're casting about for is 'sorry,' but I won't hold my breath for it. Look, let's just talk Friday after class so we can divvy up the work on the report."

"You can give the oral presentation, if you'd like."

"I'm pretty sure you're only offering because you don't want to do that part, but fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm trying to storm out in a huff. Good afternoon, Severus."

Remus headed straight to the Prefects' Bath, but to his great frustration, it was already occupied. Instead he went into the boys' loo and hid until he began to feel calm again.

"Are all teenage boys this exasperating?" he asked Moaning Myrtle.

"Oh, yes. Every last one of 'em, in their own ways."

March was drawing to a close. The weather was still miserable most days, but the early spring flowers stood defiantly bold and upright. They had taken back to sprawling on the grass any time there was even a hint of sunlight. As soon as the first daisies started to appear, sprawling season began. School robes became blankets and books became pillows. Remus had missed this more than just about anything. He pressed his nose to the earth through his robe and breathed in the scent of dirt and dew and sun-baked wool. He made chains with daisies and dandelions and the occasional flamboyant daffodil. They grew longer and longer; he could never seem to decide when to quit. Maybe he had given up this pastime years before, in first or second year. It didn't matter now. He would worship every blossom that grew on the Hogwarts grounds.

"Here," Remus said, tossing a dandelion crown to Peter. Sirius and James ribbed him for it, but Remus figured they were secretly jealous, so he tossed one to each of them too. Finally, Sirius caved and asked Remus how to make them. Remus smiled and taught him. He had no doubt Sirius would put this knowledge to some nefarious use later on.

Remus and Peter stayed after their friends grew bored and went off to pursue some other form of idyll. They dozed like lizards in the sun, ignoring the swelling wind, and only got up when the sky was entirely overtaken by clouds. By the time they strolled lazily into the castle, it had begun to drizzle.

"I need to stop by the Owlery," Peter said, stretching and yawning. "I've got a letter for my mum. Do you want to come with?"

"Sure," Remus said. He hadn't been to the Owlery in ages.

It felt colder and damper up in the tower than it had on the lawn. The wind carried and distorted the sounds of the birds in strange ways. At least the air flow improved the smell. Peter, like Remus, had no owl of his own, but availed himself freely of Sirius' tiny imported screech owl, Perdrix, who had his own private cactus to roost in. Technically Perdrix was the Black family's owl and Regulus shared him too, but they all disregarded that fact, to Regulus' great consternation. Remus cast a drying charm on the cactus pot while Peter affixed his letter.

"Sorry, I should have asked first, did you have any mail to send?" Peter asked.

“Me? No. I haven’t got it on me,” Remus lied. He hadn’t written any letters home, Remus realised with dawning horror. He hadn’t received any either, except for his birthday card. He felt suddenly lightheaded. What was wrong with him? What kind of son was he? *What kind of father was he?*

Peter cast Perdix off on the wind and leaned against the rampart, his back turned to Remus. He looked almost beautiful, silhouetted against the yellowing sky with his bright hair and dark robes whipping about him. He was still wearing the wilted dandelion crown. Remus drew in a deep, shaky breath. He was so close. It would be so easy. A little tussle, a firm shove, and it would be done. No magic needed. A skid on the wet stone slabs. A terrible accident. No one would know but the birds. Remus took a step forward.

“He’s so little,” Peter said quietly.

“Who?” Remus asked, stopping in his tracks.

“Perdrix. The owl. He’s so little. He almost fits in the palm of my hand.”

“Yes.”

“He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“He could eat me in one go. As a rat, I mean.” Peter spun on his heels. His pale eyes were wide and watery. “It frightens me.”

Remus swallowed hard. “I don’t think you need to worry about Perdrix. I happen to know that Sirius and Regulus both overfeed him, and neither realises the other is doing it. That bird’s gaming the system.”

Peter quirked a little smile, but there was no humour in it. “I used to look out at the Forbidden Forest and think, *there are so many things to be afraid of out there*, things I’ve never even heard of before. So many things that could eat me. But at least the forest looks far away from up here. Now I’m afraid of what’s inside the castle, too. Owls. Cats. Eagles, badgers, lions, snakes — the one thing they all have in common is they all eat rats.”

“No one’s going to eat you, Peter,” Remus said thickly. *I’m not going to eat you*, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t promise that, and Peter knew it.

Ridiculous. They were both holding back tears and pretending not to.

“Come on, let’s get back. I’m freezing,” Remus said. “I want to have a bath before dinner.”

“Will you carry me?”

It took Remus a moment to catch on to what Peter meant, but then he nodded. Remus scooped Peter up as soon as he transformed and tucked him into the front of his robe. He kept a protective hand over the trembling animal, pulling him close against his heart. Peter was so warm, so tiny, so trusting. Remus squeezed his eyes shut. *I’m sorry, James. Lily. Harry. I couldn’t do it. Not tonight.*

North Star

After Easter it was all O.W.L.s, all the time, as if his friends had suddenly and collectively remembered that they were at school for a reason and would very much like to stay another year. Remus became so bored that he even did a bit of revising himself, although he mostly spent his off hours in the library reading books that he'd always meant to get around to but never found the time for. Lily set up a special prefects-only revision circle, which seemed rather cliquish to Remus, but he still went along so that he could spend more time with her. He suspected she had only created the group to keep James and Sirius at bay while she prepared for her exams. As it was, she regarded Remus with nearly the same level of suspicion, but she couldn't come up with a good enough reason to exclude him.

These revision sessions turned out to be far more emotionally draining than Remus had expected. He desperately wanted Lily to speak to him as a friend, but she stuck firmly to academic subjects. They weren't friends. Not yet. Remus remembered, to his surprise, the schoolboy crush he had nursed back in third year; a flame he had snuffed as soon as it became evident how James felt about Lily. Funny, how he had forgotten ever feeling that way. It had seemed like such a dire moral dilemma at thirteen.

Remus faintly remembered going to one or two of these prefects' revision sessions in fifth year, but he had given it up, exhausted by James treating it like a reconnaissance mission and grilling Remus afterwards. Now, however, Remus had his own mission — to befriend Lily Evans — and this time, he was equipped with inside knowledge.

"Did you see any films over Easter hols?" Remus asked one afternoon as they waited for the rest of the group to file in.

"Too busy revising," Lily said, without looking up from her notes.

"Yeah, me too. I saw *Jaws* over Christmas, though. Thought it was pretty good. Have you seen it yet?" he asked, knowing full well that she had.

This gave Lily pause. Remus could see her warring with herself over whether or not to answer. "It's not 'pretty good,'" she said tersely. "It's a masterpiece."

"A masterpiece? You think so? That's a pretty strong word. What makes it different from any other thriller?" Remus watched Lily's knuckles whiten around her quill as she prepared to expound. Hook, line, and sinker.

Remus handled these repetitious spring days quite well — at least until the morning he opened his diary to cross off the date and realised, with a plummeting feeling, that it was Teddy's birthday. Well, not exactly, since Teddy was a long way off from being born, but Remus was stricken nevertheless. He was besieged by memories he was not yet prepared to face. Happy memories; the happiest memories of his life, made bitter and terrifying by a few sharp twists of fate. For weeks now, Remus had managed to subdue the pain of separation into a dull constant ache. Now it absolutely perforated him.

Remus found that he wanted, more than anything, to be with his own parents that day. He wanted them to scoop him up and fold him into their arms, to take care of him, to wrap him in blankets and feed him ice cream the way they always had after a full moon, to tell him that they loved him and lie to him that he was perfect, just as he was. He dashed off a letter home, bright and pithy, just so he could write the words *I love you* at the bottom.

Unable to go home, Remus sought out the most parental person he had at Hogwarts, Poppy Pomfrey. Even as an adult, as a colleague, he had never ceased to draw comfort from her presence. He told her that he had a stomach ache and couldn't sit through his classes. She must have known that he was faking, but she must also have sensed the deeper truth behind it, because she wrote him an excuse and allowed him to spend the morning resting in a quiet corner of the hospital wing.

Remus closed his eyes. He thought about his parents. He thought about the way he had kept them at a distance, kept his letters succinct and his visits home brief. He had been so sure he was doing the right thing, protecting them from the awful burden of living with a werewolf son. He'd thought, back then, that he had been sacrificing his own happiness for the sake of theirs. Now he realised that he had sacrificed his happiness *and* theirs, and for what? He'd never even given them a say in the matter. God, how he had squandered their fleeting time together. Remus curled into himself, wrapping his arms around his knees, trying to suppress the shaking.

Despite his proper Anglican upbringing, Remus had never bothered much with prayers — he believed them to be rather ineffectual for lycanthropes — but now seemed like as good a time as any to give it a go. He prayed that his own child would be wiser, more sensitive, more compassionate than he had ever been. Even as his mind formed the words, he knew that it was a selfish prayer. He wanted Teddy to be a more devoted son than he had. He wanted Teddy to love him best of all.

For once, he didn't push away the Terrible Thought when it arose. He felt he deserved the pain of it. He was already so shaken, so miserable, that the Terrible Thought came almost as a welcome reprieve. The Terrible Thought was his ever-growing sense that he had, in fact, through some magic he couldn't comprehend, actually travelled backward in time and inhabited the body of his younger self. It was not the simplest explanation, not the one he pointed to with his internal Occam's razor, and yet it felt more and more likely with every day that passed. Yet even if it were true, it clarified nothing. Would he wake up one morning back in his thirty-eight-year-old body? Or would he continue to age, and live his whole life a second time, always encumbered by hazy memories from another reality?

Would he even survive that long? This too was unknowable. There was only one certainty: that he had indisputably, inexorably altered the events of the past. From the moment he woke up in February 1976 he had begun to change things, big and small, and in just two months the course of events had already veered off the rails. Every day the gap between the present timeline and his own grew wider. Who knew what this new world would look like in a year? Two years? Twenty-two? Even if he found a way to return to 1998, would the world around him be the same as he had left it?

Would Teddy still exist?

That was the Terrible Question, the unthinkable, the demon that possessed him in the darkest hours of night. When Remus finally allowed himself to examine it in the daylight, he knew that for him there could be only one course of action. In all the cavernous grey labyrinth of time and space, his child was his Polaris, his beacon shining through the fog. Whatever else happened, he had to ensure that Teddy would one day be born.

Of *course* there were other things to worry about, things that were arguably more important in the world-historical sense. In this new world he had created, would they still win the war? Would there be a second war? Would Voldemort be vanquished and arise again? Would Harry Potter become the Boy Who Lived? Would they *need* a Chosen One? Would there be a Harry Potter to Choose? If Remus tried to think about these questions, he would be wracked with pain and sickness. It was all too much for one person to bear. He thought he was beginning to understand how Harry had felt.

Remus could not attempt to grapple with these questions. He could only focus on his child. He was guided by an absolute certainty that if Teddy was safe, the rest of the world would be set right, too.

What did that mean for him here and now? The answer was abhorrent. It meant that, to the best of his ability, he had to let events run their course, the same way they had the first time around. Of course there would be differences this time — he had already seen to that — but he could no longer deliberately intervene. It sounded quite reasonable when he put it that way. When he put it the other way — *stand back and let your friends die* — it was unspeakably evil. He was confident he could stay on course at least to the end of his sixteenth year. But what about the year after that? And after? And after?

He heard a rending, keening sound and realised it was coming from himself. He held himself even closer, as tight as he possibly could. He thought about his mother stroking his hair and his father singing lullabies. He thought about his friends, who could make him laugh no matter what, who had protected him throughout the years. He thought about toffee ice cream. He was home, he was safe, he had people who loved him. That was real. This was real. He was Remus Lupin, Gryffindor House, aged sixteen. That other thing, the other life, that was only a dream. A nightmare. *This* was real. He was awake. He was awake, and he had his whole life ahead of him, and he was going to be so happy. His future was a boundless, beautiful question mark. He couldn't know what it held. He didn't know. He was helpless, impotent against the whims of Fortune. He couldn't change the future, because it hadn't happened yet. You can't change something that doesn't exist.

"Did you like question ten, Moony?"

"Loved it..."

Remus blinked rapidly as they stepped into the bright sunlight. The lure of freedom was strong, even if they still had one more exam to go. He felt an almost primal desire to slough off his robes and run barefoot across the lawn. He and all the rest of his cohort, apparently. Remus looked about dazedly at the crowd of students. He watched James fiddle with a Snitch he had smuggled from who-knows-where, dazzled by the way the light reflected on its golden surface. There was something about this day. Something that made it stand out. Not the Defence exam; that had been, as Sirius put it, a piece of cake. They stopped at their sprawling spot, enjoying the unusually hot weather. Remus ran his hand back and forth, tangling it in the cool grass and getting dirt under his nails. He rested his cheek in the crook of his arm. He knew he ought to keep revising for Transfiguration, but it didn't seem important just at that moment.

"Put that away, will you?" he heard Sirius say. "Before Wormtail wets himself from excitement."

"You're tetchy today," Remus murmured without lifting his head.

"No, I'm *bored*," said Sirius. "Wish it was full moon."

Remus lifted his head. He stared at Sirius, frowning. The words had triggered a memory. It was coming back to him. *Rushing* back to him. He tried to stem the tide. He didn't want the memory. Two voices were screaming at odds within his head: *make it stop!* and *let it be. I'm bored*, Sirius had said. *I'm bored...*

"How could you *say* that?" Remus asked, voice low. Was that what he had said...?

Sirius jerked his head out of its artful loll. “C’mon, Moony, you know I didn’t mean it like —“

The thunder clap was so sudden, so close, they all jumped with fright. The students lounging by the lake shrieked and withdrew from the water in haste. Heavy clouds were rolling in, carried on a swift gale. They barely had time to gather their things before the downpour began. They ran back to the castle. James, Sirius, and Peter were laughing, whooping, throwing their heads back and drinking in the rain. For just a moment, Remus turned and saw Severus Snape back by the lake, unmoving, hair plastered to his head, face tilted up toward the sky.

Bad Influences

On the last morning of term, Moonbeam approached Remus at the Gryffindor table after breakfast. “Heya *R. J. Lupin, Gryffindor*,” she greeted him.

“Hi,” Remus said, springing to his feet. He hadn’t spoken to her since the morning after the Ravenclaw party in March. She was wearing pink lipstick and had an enormous pair of sunglasses perched on her head. What did it matter if her professors reproached her, now?

“I’m graduating, so I’m bequeathing my things,” she explained. She handed him two items: a small fluorescent painting that slowly spiralled in on itself, and a pot of what appeared to be body glitter.

“Cool,” Remus said appreciatively. “Thanks. I’m sure these will come in handy. Are you looking forward to graduation?”

“God, yes. I’m finally going to go somewhere I can be *myself*.”

Remus’ smile broadened. “I’m glad to hear it. Congratulations.”

“Well, bye forever, Lupin,” Moonbeam said breezily. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Bye forever,” he echoed.

As he sat back down, Remus realised that she had granted him a third inheritance: a sudden windfall of social capital. It felt like the entirety of Gryffindor House was staring. Surreal. Remus had never sought out that kind of attention. Sirius watched him with poorly concealed envy. “You know, I think you would have gotten on really well with her,” Remus told Sirius. This did not improve Sirius’ mood.

That evening’s Leaving Feast passed in a blur. Remus barely noticed his friends’ groans of dismay as Hufflepuff received the House Cup and the Great Hall was decked out in yellow and black. “Maybe if you and Evans hadn’t docked so many points from Gryffindor, bloody traitors...” James grumbled, but Remus ignored him.

For the first time in a long time, Remus was aflutter with anticipation. He couldn’t wait to go home and see his family. The prospect of a quiet, halcyon summer stretched out before him. He was daydreaming about blackberry brambles and paperbacks and ice lollies and television. He hadn’t watched television in *so* long. He wasn’t even sure what programmes were on anymore.

With a pang of guilt, Remus turned his attention to Sirius, who did not share his enthusiasm for the summer holidays. In fact, Sirius looked about as miserable as Remus had ever seen him, poking at his Yorkshire pudding with silent detachment. His face was pallid. Never before had he looked so much like —

Remus let his eyes wander to the Slytherin table, seeking out another trim and pallid figure, one he had scarcely given any thought to in the past few months. Regulus Black was looking positively ebullient in comparison with his older brother. And why shouldn’t he? He was going back to his *sanctum sanctorum*, a place where he was cosseted by people who loved him and given free rein to do as he pleased. Remus had a perfect picture in his mind of the neatly-lettered sign on Regulus’ bedroom door warning trespassers to keep out. Odd. Remus had never visited the Black family

house. How could he know what it looked like? He turned back to Sirius.

He's going to run away, Remus thought. It came to him with striking clarity. *You don't know that. You don't know anything*, he admonished himself.

Remus shifted his focus to Lily, two seats down to his right, who was trying to enlist him into a heated debate over the merits of trousers versus robes. Remus, having no real opinion on the matter, took Lily's side implicitly. Lily had warmed up to him a bit, in the sense that she now spoke to him quite civilly while pointedly ignoring James. Remus got the sense that she was half using him just to annoy James, but he didn't mind too much, if it meant they were finally becoming friends. She flashed Remus a genuine smile, and for a moment his heart was so full he feared it would sink, full with the image of a young boy smiling up at him with trust in his bright green eyes. Protective instinct overcame him.

Remus turned back to his left. He murmured in a low voice to Sirius, "Whatever happens this summer, don't do anything stupid, okay? Take care of yourself. And please, ask for help if you need it."

Sirius looked sideways at Remus. "Well, that's ominous. Cheers," he whispered back.

"I mean it. I'm only saying this because I know how much you hate going home for the summer," Remus said.

Sirius' nostrils flared with anger. "That godforsaken pile of bricks is not my *home*, and I can look after myself, thanks. I've already got *one* mother obsessed with keeping tabs on me; I don't need *you* to pile on."

Remus recoiled, stung by the unjust comparison. "I'm not keeping tabs. I just worry about you."

"Yeah, because you don't fucking *trust* me," Sirius growled. He pushed back his chair with a deafening scrape and stormed out of the Great Hall. Remus automatically rose to follow him, but James stopped him with a stern look.

"Moony. Don't," James said before chasing after Sirius. Remus sat back down and stared listlessly at his plate, wondering how he'd managed to botch that conversation so badly.

Across from him, Peter shifted uncomfortably, looking back and forth from Remus to the entryway. "Go on," Remus said. Peter smiled gratefully at him and then scrambled out of the hall.

"God, don't they *ever* get tired of the histrionics?" Remus heard Lily say to her friends.

"Can't see how it's any of *your* business," Remus snapped at her. He knew he was taking it out on her, but her callousness upset him. Lily ignored him. Remus stubbornly remained in his seat, all the way through two helpings of pudding, ignoring the bubble of antagonism that seemed to press in on him from all sides. By the end of his meal, he was feeling far less prickly, and remorse began to settle in.

"Lily," he called out as she was leaving the table. He stood up too, so that he could look her in the eye. "I'm sorry for what I said. It was uncalled for."

Lily tilted her head, assessing him. "No it wasn't, but I accept your apology. I'm sorry too. I don't know what that was all about, but it seemed pretty bad."

"It was," Remus admitted. "We don't really fight like that, not very often."

"I don't know how you avoid it. They fight with everybody else," Lily said.

"I guess," Remus said, smiling without humour. "Maybe I was just overdue for a row."

Remus made to leave the Great Hall, but he was stopped by a firm voice calling out his name. "Mr. Lupin. May I have a word?" Even better. Shamefaced, he followed Minerva McGonagall to her office.

"You can't give me detention on the last day of term," Remus pointed out as he sat down opposite Professor McGonagall's desk.

Professor McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "No one said anything about detention, Mr. Lupin, although you could certainly earn one with that sort of impertinence." She set a cup of chamomile and a plate of Tunnock's Teacakes in front of him.

Remus eyed the treats, feeling a bit queasy. "No, thank you. I had double pudding," he admitted. Professor McGonagall smiled and took one for herself, peeling back the crinkly foil as she spoke.

"Mr. Lupin. Remus. You're not in trouble. I just wanted to check in and see how you've been doing. You haven't come to visit me all semester. Are you looking forward to the summer holiday?"

"Yes, I am. And I've been well. Just busy with O.W.L.s. May I be excused to go to bed, Professor? I ate a lot and I'm very tired."

There was something knowing in the way Professor McGonagall regarded him, a depth of compassion that made him squirm in his seat. "I've always been pleased to see how well you get on with your fellow Gryffindors. As your Head of House, it makes me proud. But I hope you know that it's all right to differ and dissent sometimes, Remus, even amongst our friends."

"I know. You told me that when you made me a prefect."

"Yes, I suppose I did." She softened. "I'm sure you must think of me as a very old woman, but I do remember what it's like to be sixteen, believe it or not. It's perfectly natural to feel like things are changing around you. It's all part of growing up. You're becoming your own man."

Remus frowned. "Is this because of what happened just now at the Leaving Feast? Because it was just a row. They're still my best mates."

"I'm happy to hear it. I've no wish to pry into your personal affairs," she lowered her voice, "but you must understand it is my duty, as your Head of House, to ask whether you find yourself facing any challenges pertaining to your condition."

"No," Remus blurted quickly, "that's got nothing to do with it. Believe me."

"I do believe you, and I'm heartily glad of it. You know that your safety and wellbeing are my first priority."

"Thank you, Professor," Remus mumbled, embarrassed. "Is that all?"

She considered him for a long moment. "It hasn't escaped my notice that you've grown increasingly distracted during lessons, this past term. I've spoken to some of your other professors, and they have expressed similar concerns."

Remus flushed. "I'm sorry, Professor. I'll work harder next year."

“Oh, there’s no need to overtax yourself. On the contrary, you’ve been excelling in all your subjects. Believe me, if I had any concerns about your academic performance, I would have spoken to you well before your O.W.L. exams.”

“Oh. Erm, thanks, then.”

“In fact, Mr. Lupin, you rather remind me of myself at your age.”

“Why, were you a werewolf back then? If you’ve got a cure I’d love to know.” Remus bit his tongue. He had no idea what devilish force impelled him to speak so freely with his Head of House. He had been intimidated by her for years, but something had changed between them; he felt as if he could speak with her as a friend. A *colleague*. Remus frowned, confused. He tried to clear his head of the hazy memory-that-could-not-be-a-memory.

“No, Mr. Lupin. I was *bored*. It’s not at all uncommon for high-achieving students to grow restless in class, especially at your age. It speaks to a desire for greater intellectual stimulation.”

“Your classes are really interesting,” Remus protested. Professor McGonagall cut him off with a raised hand.

“I’m not fishing for compliments, Mr. Lupin. I am perfectly confident in the efficacy of my syllabus. I am simply pointing out that schoolwork alone might not be enough to satisfy your academic curiosity. It certainly wasn’t enough for me, when I was sixteen. It was never designed to be, I might add.”

“Right. So what are you suggesting I do? Join the chess club or something?”

“Well, it’s not the worst idea in the world. Chess clubs tend to attract all sorts of interesting people.”

“You think I need new friends,” Remus said flatly. “You think my friends are a bad influence on me.”

“Not in the least! ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ don’t enter into it. It’s a question of quantity, not quality. I think it’s healthy for anyone to be exposed to a variety of people. I would say the very same thing to Mr. Potter or Mr. Black.”

“So you think I don’t have enough friends. That’s even worse.”

“Please don’t imagine that I doubt your ability to make friends. You’re a very kind young man, Remus. I know that you’re on friendly terms with many other students, within and outwith your House. But I’ve taught you for five years now, and in that time I’ve observed that you and your friends can be quite... insular.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“Not necessarily. To have a strong bond with one’s friends is a wonderful thing. I only hope that you won’t miss out on other opportunities for friendship when they arise — won’t see other connections as less valuable, just because they’re less intense.”

“Thanks for your concern, Professor, but I really don’t need any new friends. I’ve got enough on my plate with three of them.”

Professor McGonagall chuckled. “Well, I’m not going to argue with that. Just remember, you never know when someone might surprise you.”

“No offence, Professor, but that’s a truism,” Remus muttered.

That made Professor McGonagall laugh out loud. “There was something else, Mr. Lupin, if you can spare another minute.”

“Yes, Professor McGonagall.”

“As you may know, I sometimes appoint an upperclassman to assist with first-year Transfiguration lessons. Next year’s incoming class will be the largest we’ve had in years, and even for a seasoned professor like myself, it can be challenging to see to it that every student gets the attention they need. This is especially true for beginners. I’ve no need to impress upon you the importance of building a firm foundation in Transfiguration.”

“We never had an assistant in our lessons,” Remus pointed out.

“No, well, your cohort is smaller than average. Only eight students in Gryffindor! I thought that meant your class would be easier to manage. Mind you, I’ve been eating my words for five years now.” She took a bite of teacake, as if the mere thought required extra fortification. “I know that your sixth year will be a busy time, but I would like to take you on as my student assistant, if you’re interested in the job.”

“Me? Shouldn’t it be a seventh-year?” Remus asked.

“It should be the N.E.W.T.-level student best suited to the role.”

“Then why not James? Or Lily Evans? They’re both better at Transfiguration than I am.”

“Mr. Potter and Ms. Evans are excellent students, but I’m not convinced that either of them have the right temperament for mentoring first-years. Perhaps in the future. In any case, Mr. Lupin, even were you not at the top of your class, I would still be asking you. Talent isn’t a deciding factor for this position; so long as you can keep a few steps ahead of the first-year curriculum, you’ll do just fine. What’s more important is your ability to be responsible, compassionate, and patient with the younger students.”

Remus flushed. Was that really him? Sirius’ words echoed in his ears. *You don’t fucking trust me.* Sirius had been absolutely right. Remus didn’t feel very compassionate or patient, just then.

“There’s no need to decide tonight,” Professor McGonagall continued. “Take the summer to think it over, and don’t hesitate to write to me with any questions. I know you’re tired, and I’ve kept you long enough. You’ve a long trip ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall. Good night.”

Remus dragged his feet all the way back to the dorms. He had been through the emotional wringer in the past hour or so. Sirius made him feel impossibly old and cantankerous; Professor McGonagall made him feel childish. He understood exactly what his Head of House had offered him: something to keep him occupied. Something under her direct supervision. Perhaps she was afraid of what he might do if left to his own devices. He could see no other explanation for it. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help feeling flattered that she had singled him out for attention.

Remus still had one more challenge to face before he could finally sleep. Sirius had already drawn the drapes around his bed by the time Remus entered the room. Remus hesitated for a minute, wondering whether or not he should intrude. Steeling himself, he approached Sirius’ bed and whispered, “Knock, knock.”

A long silence, and then Remus heard a muffled, “Who’s there?”

“Apologetic Werewolf.”

“You can stop, I’ve heard this one before.” The drapes flung themselves open. Sirius was lying on his stomach looking glum. “Say what you have to say, Moony. I’m tired.”

“Good. Me too, so this’ll be quick. Sirius,” Remus began. He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. Sirius didn’t budge to make room for him. “I’m sorry. You’re right, about me not trusting you. But you’re dead wrong, too.”

“Don’t be clever about it. Just tell me what you mean.”

“Sirius, I’d trust you with my life. *I do* trust you with my life, every single month. No, I mean it. If I could turn into a wolf right now, I’d roll over and let you scratch my belly. That’s how much I trust you.”

“But?”

“*And* I’d trust you with James’ life, or Peter’s. I think you’d jump in front of a moving train for us — even if you didn’t have to. That’s the problem.”

“The problem is I’m too good a friend?”

“The problem is that you can be reckless. You know it’s true. You do know that none of us want to see you get hurt, don’t you?” Remus pushed a lock of hair away from Sirius’ face. He felt a surge of something out of place, yet deeply familiar. Paternal concern. He couldn’t think of any other word for it. “I worry about you. I can’t help it. Especially if you won’t take the time to worry about yourself.”

“I’ve got enough to worry about,” Sirius murmured into his pillow.

“I know. I know,” Remus said, trying to be soothing. He did know, and it sent a prickle of fear down his spine. He couldn’t name it; he didn’t know what it was that made him feel so afraid for Sirius, but he couldn’t shake it either. He had visions of dark clouds closing in around his friend. “Hey. If I promise not to be so overbearing, will you promise to take better care of yourself? If not for your own sake, then for ours?”

“I don’t know. Think you can stick to that promise?”

“I can try.” Remus swallowed the lump in his throat. “What would we do without our Padfoot, hm? Where would that leave us?”

“Oh, stop. You’re being weird now.” Sirius finally rolled onto his back and looked up at Remus. “*I’m* supposed to be the melodramatic one here. It doesn’t suit you.”

Remus smiled. “No. Let’s not do this again.”

“Good. I’m done talking. Go to bed, Moony.” With that, Sirius morphed into his canine form, which was his signature way of ending an unpleasant conversation. Remus gave him a quick scratch behind the ear and drew the curtains for him.

Remus flopped heavily onto his own bed. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Professor McGonagall had a point. Maybe his friendships *were* too intense. He couldn’t seem to stop imagining all the ways his friends could die.

Remus Lupin is Outstanding!

Remus had always loved the Start of Term Feast. It was one of the highlights of his calendar year. He was ravenously hungry by the time the meal began, and his spirits were buoyed by his friends' boisterous energy. James had undergone one of those miraculous summer transformations that sometimes happen with teenagers, and had returned to school handsome, bronzed, and graced with the barest hint of dark stubble on his cheeks. Sirius looked worlds away from the drawn and downcast boy Remus had seen off at the end of fifth year. He had regained his healthy glow and lively mannerisms. He had run away from home over the summer.

Remus glanced across the hall at Regulus Black. He looked even worse than his usual gloomy standard. He looked like death warmed up. It was almost as if there were a finite amount of happiness allotted to the two Black children, and they were locked in an unending battle for custody. They never looked well at the same time.

Remus let his eyes trail further along the Slytherin table, seeking out Severus Snape, but Snape wasn't doing anything interesting. He was just eating potatoes.

Remus half listened as Headmaster Dumbledore introduced the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, a prim-looking woman in her seventies or eighties with permed and blue-rinsed hair. He was much more interested in the Sorting Ceremony. He tried to set a good example by clapping equally for every student, but his efforts were to no avail; he was drowned out by the applause of his fellow Gryffindors every time a new student joined their ranks. Remus focused harder than ever before on the names and faces of the incoming first-years, as he would soon be working with them in Professor McGonagall's classes. He felt a frisson of excitement, thinking about the year to come. He hadn't mentioned the new position to his friends yet.

As always, there was a bit of mingling over dinner, students getting up to greet friends from other Houses, or swapping seats up and down the length of the table in order to catch up with everybody. It seemed like Remus, James, Sirius, and Peter were the only ones (excepting first-years) who stayed planted in their seats. That didn't stop people from gravitating toward them. James' quidditch friends stopped by to greet him, including several members of the Hufflepuff team with whom he'd become quite chummy during last year's season, when they had been united by their quest to trounce Slytherin. They were also visited by a pretty fifth-year whom James and Sirius had met over the summer holiday, and who seemed particularly interested in furthering her acquaintance with Sirius. Remus was relieved not to be the focus of anyone's attention — that is, until a heavy hand clapped down on his shoulder, causing him to flinch and drop his spoon into his soup dish. "There he is! The rising star of Gryffindor!" Remus hastened to his feet, although he was sure Slughorn wouldn't have minded continuing to shout at the back of his head. His face grew painfully hot.

"Well done, my boy. What a truly *outstanding* achievement. 'O's in every single subject, and a

special commendation from the exam board! Remarkable!”

Remus wished the floor would open up and swallow him whole. He felt as if everyone in the Great Hall was staring at him. “Not every subject,” he mumbled. “There was Muggle Studies.”

“Yes, yes, well, an ‘E’ is certainly nothing to sneeze at. And besides,” — at this Slughorn finally lowered his voice a bit — “we all know that certain O.W.L.s are more... decorative. Nice to have on the CV, though.”

“I don’t know that,” Remus said, annoyed now. He had *earned* that ‘E’, damn it!

“Lupin, I’m having a little get-together to celebrate the beginning of the year. Sunday roast. Very informal. I *insist* that you join us.”

“Oh. Erm. All right,” said Remus, too discomfited to come up with an excuse. He’d be hard-pressed to find one, anyway. It wasn’t as if he had anywhere else to be on the first Sunday of term.

“Splendid. Splendid! Well, I’ll let you get back to it.” Slughorn gave Remus another bracing pat on the shoulder and moved down the row to speak with Lily, no doubt extending her the same invitation. For some reason, Slughorn seemed perfectly able to modulate his volume with her.

Remus sat back down. He knew his face was still redder than a boiled lobster. “That was mortifying,” he said quietly. There was no point pretending otherwise.

“‘O’s in every subject?’” James repeated. “Why didn’t you tell us, mate?”

“How was I meant to tell you? Should I have written you with my results?” Remus thought that to do so would have come across as boastful.

“Yes. I sent you mine,” James countered. Of course. Well, Remus had put his foot in it. What else was new? In fact, Remus had seen the letter from James, but that had made him feel even less inclined to share his own results.

“It doesn’t mean anything. I guess I’m just good at taking exams, is all.”

“Doesn’t mean anything?” James looked irritated now. “Well, I guess it must not seem impressive to a *natural* like yourself, but some of us are actually proud of the marks we earned.”

“I didn’t mean to imply — James, you did really well on your exams. You should be proud.”

“Don’t be patronising.” James ran a hand through his thick hair. Remus knew that it was an unconscious gesture and not an artful one, because the hair looked wonky when he took his hand away.

Remus knew better than to say ‘sorry’ when James was like this; it would only set him off. Instead, he bought time by eating a spoonful of sticky toffee pudding before asking James if he had any good prospects for the quidditch team this year. This diffused the tension, at least for the time being. They were back on level ground. Remus couldn’t help but notice how often James glanced Lily’s way as he spoke (a bit louder than strictly necessary). As usual, she ignored him.

“Davies went out for Beater last year — she was only in third year then, but she was strong — I’m hoping she tries out again, I think this will be her year. Do you know what Bailey said when she tried out though? He said he didn’t think girls could play Beater. Stupidest thing I ever heard. I gave him a piece of my mind, I can tell you that.”

Sirius cleared his throat and jerked his head toward Bailey, who was seated only four places down from James. However, James' speech had done the trick. Lily finally turned toward him.

"Did you kick him off the team?" Lily asked.

"I — what?" James responded, caught off guard.

"Kick him off the team," Lily repeated. "If he said that to your face, he's probably said worse when you're not around. You can't expect your female teammates to play alongside someone who talks like that. Aren't you captain this year? Or did I hear wrong?"

"I am captain," James said quickly. He drew himself up a little straighter. "Yeah. That's right. I *am* the captain." Suddenly, he had that *look* about him. The look that meant he was about to do something extremely impulsive and probably foolish. Remus didn't know *what* foolish thing James was about to do, but he could see it coming like a speeding train. Sirius obviously sensed it too, because he reached for James and opened his mouth as if to speak, but before he could form the words James rose to his feet and slammed his hand against the table. "Bailey!" he called out.

Bailey turned to him, obviously taken aback. He froze with his fork still stuck in his mouth. The surrounding Gryffindors fell silent. Lily clapped a hand over her mouth.

"You're off the quidditch team," James announced. "I'm sorry, but I — no, you know what? I'm *not* sorry. There's no place for *sexism* on the Gryffindor team. We won't have it." He sat back down. The other students looked flabbergasted, none more so than the freshly sacked Bailey. Sirius cringed and tried to hide behind his sleeves.

Lily, still covering her mouth, began to tremble, then shake, then convulse with laughter. She buried her face in her hands. Slowly, nervously, the others around her started to giggle too. Peter awkwardly attempted to applaud, but cut himself off as no one joined in.

James, seeing Lily's reaction, lit up with a grin. Only a close observer would spot the tremor in his hands. Remus suspected that as soon as they got back to the safety of their dormitory, James might have a nervous breakdown.

Once he had finally had his fill of watching Lily laugh, James turned back to Remus, Sirius, and Peter. "So," he asked, "anyone got any leads on a first-rate seeker?"

"...and then he just stood right up, *smacked* the table, and shouted 'You're off the team! We've got no place for sexists like you!' And everyone went dead quiet. Just like that."

Remus spun around, ready to be annoyed. He knew Lily had no qualms about making fun of James, but to mock him for that particular episode seemed uncharacteristically cruel, considering. His objection fizzled out when he saw her expression.

"...It was absolutely brilliant. I almost died laughing. The look on that creep Bailey's face! It was a work of art. Bloody incredible." The cluster of students gathered around Lily all laughed. Well, all but Snape, who looked like he was about to be sick.

Remus manoeuvred around the group, stalking right up to Snape, who withdrew from Lily's orbit as if repelled by Remus' magnetic field. *The way a wolf steers a straggling sheep away from the*

herd. "Bet I know what you're thinking," Remus said.

"I am confident that you do not," Snape said, turning the full force of his scowl onto Remus.

"Does it really matter why he did it, as long as he did the right thing?" Remus continued.

"In front of an audience, in order to lap up applause? Forgive me if I'm not impressed."

Remus shrugged. "The first part, I'll grant you. The second part — I can guarantee you he was not thinking about people applauding him, or any other audience response. I'm not sure he thinks at *all* when he acts on impulse like that." Remus did not mention that James had been performing for an audience of one, and that he had indeed received the desired response.

"That's not a recommendation in his favour," Snape said.

"No. It's a clarification. No one clapped, by the way." Remus glanced back at Lily, now engaged in some other topic of conversation. "I know you won't believe this, so I'm not sure why I'm bothering to say it, but he wasn't putting on an act or anything. He really believes in what he said, and he stands by it. But he wouldn't have had the guts to do it if Lily hadn't pushed him. He's grateful to her." Without Lily, James probably never would have *thought* to say it out loud, either. Remus wasn't going to let Snape have that, though.

"Guts," Snape echoed with distaste. "Isn't that supposed to be what you Gryffindors are all about?"

"I'm not sure," Remus said, taking the question seriously. "I think boldness, or whatever you want to call it, looks very different on different people. And it's not just for Gryffindors, either."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised, Lupin. That's not toeing the party line."

"What, that only one quarter of the population can be brave? I should hope no one actually believes that." Remus smiled wryly.

"Twenty-one percent," Snape corrected.

"Sorry?"

"On average, twenty-one percent of the student body is sorted into Gryffindor."

"How did you know that?"

"I read."

"You did the calculation yourself, didn't you?" Remus couldn't stop himself from grinning. He imagined Snape sitting up late after the Sorting Ceremony, adding up his tally and compiling six years of data in his tatty old notebook, unable to fall asleep without a bit of recreational maths before bed.

"That would be a waste of my time," Snape said. Was he blushing?

"No, it wouldn't. You just demonstrated exactly how you can use that information."

"What, to be pedantic at parties? I hardly need to put in the extra effort."

"Did you make a pie chart? I'd quite like to see a pie chart."

Snape scoffed. "I'm not some kind of *Ravenclaw*," he said disdainfully.

“Right. Of course. Only a quarter of the population uses graphs. Classic Ravenclaw trait.”

“...Twenty-eight percent,” Snape muttered. Remus giggled. He was pleased as punch that he had gotten Snape, of all people, to crack a joke.

Once Slughorn arrived — fashionably late to his own party — they all sat down to dinner. Lily, the clear favourite, was placed at Slughorn’s righthand side. She mouthed the word ‘sorry’ to Snape as she took her seat. Interesting. Remus sat next to Snape. Just like in the Great Hall, food and drink materialised on the table all at once. The roast appeared pre-carved on everyone’s plates; accompanying dishes were laid out at the centre of the table. The centrepiece was a fantastical porcelain soup tureen in the shape of a dragon’s head with steam rising from its nostrils. A moment later, a miniature pie appeared on Snape’s plate. “I remembered this time,” Slughorn called to Snape across the table, evidently proud of himself.

Remus eyed the pie with envy. “How come you get that?” he asked.

“I don’t eat meat,” Snape answered.

“Oh.” Remus wasn’t sure why he was surprised by that information. He hadn’t exactly taken the time to study what Snape put on his plate at mealtimes.

“Some years ago,” Slughorn expounded, drowning out any other conversation, “a muggle fellow invented a curious device. A mechanical table with a system of ropes and pulleys. The centre was cut out, along with each place setting, so that the servants could raise and lower them from the kitchen below. The guests would send down a note requesting a particular dish, and a servant would send it back up to them. It was devised for intimate parties, so that diners could speak freely without servants hovering about and interrupting. Not unlike our system of conveying food from the kitchens here at Hogwarts, if you think about it. I prefer our method, of course, but you’ve got to admire the ingenuity of those muggles. The mechanical table was very in vogue amongst the Tsars and Tsarinas of the old Russian Empire.”

“Thomas Jefferson had one as well,” said Demosthenes Doty. He had a rich American grandmother, and he was always eager to bring it up, because it was the only interesting thing about him.

“Didn’t know this was going to be a Muggle Studies lecture,” grumbled a dour second-year Slytherin off to Remus’ right. Remus shot her a dirty look. Regulus Black, who was far too well-bred to grumble under his breath about anything, nodded at the second-year in a subtle gesture of approval. The younger Slytherin lit up at his acknowledgment.

Snape acted as if he hadn’t heard the exchange. He appeared to be dissecting his food for examination.

Another second-year, this one a Gryffindor, turned to Lily with wide eyes. “Have you ever seen one of those things? I mean because you’re a... erm...” he trailed off, floundering and turning bright red.

“Because I’m muggle-born?” Lily supplied, not unkindly. “No, I’m afraid my family home is a bit humbler than that.” She met Snape’s eyes across the table with a little smirk, which he returned.

From there, *thank God*, the conversation shifted to safer topics. Remus only hoped he would not be called upon to talk about himself. He nearly jumped out of his skin a few minutes later when Snape nudged him with a bony elbow. Snape pointed at the crust of his pie, which he had divided into four portions labelled ‘R’, ‘H’, ‘S’, and ‘G’. Remus laughed in delighted surprise, quickly putting a

fist to his mouth to muffle the sound.

“Twenty-one percent Gryffindor, twenty-two percent Slytherin, twenty-eight percent Ravenclaw, twenty-nine percent Hufflepuff,” Snape explained in a low voice, pointing at the chart with his knife. “That’s over a period of fifty years.”

“Fascinating,” Remus murmured back. “I had no idea there was such a wide disparity.”

“Yes, well. It explains a thing or two about Gryffindors.” Snape stuck his knife right through the ‘G’. Mushroom gravy bubbled up from the rupture. “Compensating for size.”

“Very funny. If Slytherin’s only one percentage point larger than Gryffindor, why’s the pie slice so much bigger?”

“My knife must have slipped,” Snape replied.

“Of course.” Remus looked about the table, counting. “What’s very interesting is that there are more Slytherins and Gryffindors at this table than either of the other Houses. I wonder how the data from Slughorn’s dinner table correlates with the student body at large.”

“Ah, now you’re thinking like a social scientist. I haven’t run the numbers, but I suspect you’ll find it strongly favours Slytherin, with Gryffindor close behind.”

“Do you have a working theory as to why that is?”

“Yes,” Snape said, dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Slughorn likes people he thinks are special.”

“Oh. That’s not a secret, you know,” Remus whispered back. At a regular volume he added, “Well, now that that’s settled, I think I’ll go ahead and claim my share.” He swooped toward the Gryffindor slice with his fork. Snape smacked his hand away.

“...and anyway, as my mother always says, you can tell everything you need to know about a person by their table manners,” said Regulus Black, looking pointedly at Remus and Snape. Snape dropped his hands to his lap and scowled at Regulus. Remus smiled politely.

“Ah, yes,” Slughorn said jovially. “She’s certainly a woman with opinions, your mother.”

Remus snorted. He looked forward to recounting that one to Sirius. He actually quite admired that Slughorn could give such an equivocal response and still confound Regulus into thinking there had been a compliment in it somewhere. Perhaps Remus could learn a few things at Slughorn’s feet, yet.

Unfortunately, Remus had barely any time to queue up another daydream before the dreaded moment arrived — his name came up in conversation. “...when the time comes, I intend to enjoy my retirement to the fullest, but I’ve still got years of teaching in me left, I assure you. Of course, if we keep bringing up students like Lupin here, we’ll all be out of our jobs soon enough!” Slughorn beamed at Remus. As Remus was sitting diametrically opposite him, he’d seen fit to raise his voice even further. In his peripheral vision, Remus saw several heads turn toward him all at once. Lily looked alert, intense, her sublime green eyes pinning him to his chair.

“Sorry?” Remus responded, trying not to look at her.

“Come now, don’t be so modest, Lupin!” Slughorn continued. “I hear Minerva — excuse me, that’s Professor McGonagall to you — I hear she’s made you her second in command this year.

Quite an honour, that. She must hold you in high esteem — and Minerva's esteem is not to be taken lightly, I can tell you that!" He chuckled, as if at a private joke.

"I'm just helping a bit with the first-year students," Remus explained. He lowered his voice, as if to counter-balance Slughorn's exuberance. "Making sure they all follow instructions in class. That's all it is."

"Really? I never even heard that Professor McGonagall was looking for help," Lily said with a frown.

There it was. That was *exactly* what James was going to say, too. That was why Remus hadn't quite broached the subject with him yet. He girded himself and tried to think of it as an opportunity to rehearse the conversation he'd be having later on, in the dorms. "No, well, you see, she sort of asked me."

"She asked you?" Really, Lily didn't have to sound *so* disbelieving.

"I guess she thought I'd be good at it," Remus said apologetically. Well, that rehearsal was a complete and utter flop. Remus tried to make himself very small. Now he would *have* to tell James straight away. He couldn't let his friends find out secondhand. (Maybe he could swipe some treats from the dinner table to soften the blow. Slughorn would probably notice if he made off with the whole crystal decanter of port, alas.)

"I didn't know you had professorial ambitions," Snape murmured beside him. He said the word *professorial* like it was a filthy insult. Snape's expression was neutral, but Remus sensed that, for some reason that was beyond his capacity to understand, Snape was angry with him. Angrier than usual.

"I don't have any ambitions," Remus said hollowly. "Those are only for *your* twenty-two percent." Snape did not seem to appreciate the joke.

Many Unhappy Returns

The Potions classroom was especially quiet on Thursday mornings. That was when Remus liked to go. It was the one place in the castle he could retreat to and be *sure* that no one would be interested enough to follow him. It helped that he knew Severus Snape had Arithmancy on Thursday mornings. His solitude was more or less guaranteed.

Remus stirred his cauldron lazily, watching as the translucent liquid became clear. (That wasn't a self-assessment. It said it right there in the printed directions: 'stir lazily, either direction, 80 strokes, or thereabout.') After fifty-nine strokes clockwise and twenty-two anti-clockwise, he raised the height of his tripod and sat back to let the potion simmer. His mind was elsewhere, which was exactly the right frame of mind for this particular brewing process. He was mentally preparing himself for that afternoon's Slytherin-Ravenclaw Transfiguration section.

The Gryffindor-Hufflepuff section was an absolute joy to work with. The first-year Gryffindors were still under the erroneous impression that Remus was 'cool' thanks to his association with James and Sirius, and the Hufflepuffs seemed to have picked up the same notion from their classmates. The students had even started to come to him with questions they were too embarrassed to ask Professor McGonagall. ("Is that what a card case is supposed to look like?" "Will it work if I hold the wand in my left hand?" "What if I never get it right?" "Does it hurt the beetle when we transfigure it?") The Slytherin-Ravenclaw section presented more of a challenge. Remus had expected a bit of defiance from the Slytherins, although he had still been optimistic that he could win them over. However, he hadn't been prepared for so much resistance from the Ravenclaws. The biggest trouble-maker was a Ravenclaw boy who never tired of whinging about Remus' presence. ("Why should we have to listen to him? He's only a student like us.")

Worst of all, part of Remus believed him. He *was* only a student. He had made the grave mistake of forgetting to write his first Transfiguration essay of the year because he was preoccupied with coaching the first-years through *their* Transfiguration essays. ("Why bother?" James had asked him. "You're already an expert, aren't you?") Professor McGonagall had given him a detention for it. He thought it was a bit unfair, considering the circumstances, but he didn't dare raise the issue with her.

On top of that, his course load was heavier than anticipated. Slughorn had somehow roped him into taking N.E.W.T.-level Potions, which Remus had never planned on doing. Admittedly, he rather enjoyed it, but it occupied a great deal of time and energy — even if their class only sporadically met in person.

Remus stood to check on his potion. It was looking just about periwinkle now, which meant it was time to add the lavender tincture. A little rivulet ran down his thumb as he squeezed thirteen drops into the mixture. He stuck the thumb in his mouth, relishing the sweet pungent taste. This was generally frowned upon in Potions class. Just another reason to brew in solitude.

He sat back down; all that was left to do was wait. He tried to work on his Charms essay, but he couldn't focus, so he pulled *Potions and the Human Anatomy* down from the shelf. It was becoming a favourite of his. He opened to the first chapter he'd ever read, *Potions Affecting the Human Reproductive System*. He was quite interested in the subject of potions to ease and regulate menstruation, because each process in this category was, in one way or another, tied to the lunar cycle. Remus questioned whether that was old superstition or sound magical theory, but when he went to the library seeking more recent writings on the subject, he found scant information. To think that menstruation was so taboo that scarcely any work had been done on it in the past fifty

years — that was shameful, but it only fuelled his desire to learn more. There might be a good project in there, down the line. Perhaps Lily would be interested in working with him; he didn't think she'd be shy about it.

A bulky shadow fell over his workbench. Remus looked up at Professor Slughorn. For someone who blustered as much as he did, Slughorn had a way of sneaking up on you. "Oh, Lupin," Slughorn said, his voice much softer than usual. His brows were knitted in concern. "Dear boy. You haven't gone and gotten yourself into trouble, have you?"

"Beg pardon, sir?" Remus asked, bewildered.

Slughorn gestured to the open book on the table. "Lupin, if you've gotten a girl in the family way, I — Madame Pomfrey — any of the school staff — we're all here to help you. I implore you, don't try anything rash on your own."

Remus grew feverishly warm. "*No!*" he exclaimed. "That is — no, I haven't, Professor Slughorn. I'm just reading out of academic interest. I swear it."

Slughorn brightened a bit, though he still seemed perturbed. "Well, I'm *very* glad to hear it, very glad indeed." He pulled up a chair and sat across the table from Remus. This was unprecedented. Remus felt sweat pooling above his upper lip and itching at his temples.

"Lupin, I've been very impressed with your progress over the past year, as well you know. I'm aware that you've been here nearly every week since the start of term, and I'm delighted to see you availing yourself of the resources of the Potions lab. That sort of enterprise is sure to get you noticed when you go out into the world. However... I can't help but notice that certain resources are dwindling more rapidly than others."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not sure I understand you." It was the truth.

"Ingredient stores, Lupin. I find myself replenishing the same ingredients every fortnight or so. It doesn't take a Shorelock Helms to work it out, as the muggles say."

"Sherlock Holmes," Remus corrected without thinking. His mind was scattered; he searched for a good excuse and came up empty-handed. "I was very interested in learning more, after my project last year..."

"Indeed," Slughorn said gently. "I think you've mastered the subject by now. You could most likely brew a better calming draught than the esteemed Dagworth-Granger himself. I only wonder where all of that calming draught is disappearing to."

"It's not habit-forming," Remus said quickly.

"Yes, Mr. Lupin, I'm well aware of the properties of calming draught. I'm not concerned about its effect on you. I'm concerned about whatever it is that's driving you to take it so frequently."

"Oh." Remus was at a loss. "I guess I'm just worried about N.E.W.T.s. I don't take it all that often," he lied. He felt ashamed. He wanted to look anywhere but at Slughorn's face. Slughorn looked *sad*. It didn't suit him at all.

"Well, I think you can afford to pace yourself. The exams are still a year and a half away. But if there's anything else troubling you — anything at all — just know that you can come to me any time. Or Professor McGonagall, if you prefer. We all want to see you thrive, Mr. Lupin."

Thrive. Like a drooping plant that needs a sprinkle of water and an afternoon in the sun to perk up.

Or a Sunday roast. Or a prefect badge. Or a tutoring job. Or a Potions N.E.W.T. Just keep busy, keep the mind occupied, and everything will sort itself out in the end. First McGonagall, now Slughorn — did *all* of his professors feel sorry for him? Then again, why shouldn't they? Wasn't his very presence at Hogwarts an extravagant act of charity? And hadn't he taken it all on, because he was addicted to being invited in?

Then why couldn't he remember saying 'yes' to any of it? *Why couldn't he remember?*

"Might want to keep an eye on that cauldron, Mr. Lupin. It's losing quite a bit of moisture. I'd hate to see it go aquamarine on you. There's no fixing it once it's gone aquamarine."

"Shit!" Lupin exclaimed, leaping to his feet to adjust the tripod. "I mean sh...ortbread. Sorry."

Slughorn chuckled. "Five points from Gryffindor for language," he said, "and twenty points to Gryffindor for the finest shade of periwinkle I've seen in years. Now, I'll leave you to it. Just remember: you needn't go it alone. I know you have plenty of friends who'd like to help you out."

So people kept telling him. It truly mystified Remus that anyone could get that impression about him.

The following Wednesday was Sirius' seventeenth birthday, a day he'd been anticipating for — well, for far too long. They had done most of their celebrating over the weekend — it wasn't every year that Hallowe'en fell on a Hogsmeade Sunday, after all — but even a full weekend of revelry could not top Sirius' excitement for the day itself. For as long as Remus had known him, Sirius had fantasised about becoming an adult. Now the day had finally arrived, and he was radiant with joy. No nostalgia, no mourning for a childhood forever lost to time. The very first thing Sirius did upon waking in the morning was to pull out his detested travelling cloak (green velvet, silver buttons, *tasteful* Black family insignia embroidered round the collar in silk thread) — the cloak he was obliged to wear every time he returned to 12 Grimmauld Place — and cast it into the fire. The expression on his face as he watched it burn approached something like divine ecstasy. James and Peter cheered him on.

Remus, happy for his friend but uncomfortable watching a perfectly good cloak go up in flames, turned the other way. "D'you think your brother might've wanted that?" he asked as he pulled up his socks.

"I *know* he did," Sirius said gleefully.

It was a funny coincidence that Sirius and Regulus shared a birthday, three hundred and sixty-six days apart (in a leap year). Remus sometimes wondered if the seeds of their enmity lay in years of shared birthday parties. ("Three months," Sirius would say. "That's how long it took them to realise they needed a backup plan.") Remus remembered second year, when he'd looked across the hall and spotted little Regulus with an identical stack of cards and parcels to the one that sat in front of Sirius. Every year after that, Sirius' gifts had dwindled while Regulus' stayed the same.

This year, Sirius received only three cards. One was from the Potters, wishing him many happy returns. Another was from Sirius' uncle Alphard. Sirius looked concerned as he read it, but his face lit up when he got to the end. "Oh, brilliant!" he exclaimed. "He's paid in advance for my apparition lessons. He's a good man, old Uncle Alphard."

Sirius picked up the third card, which was sealed in a dark blue envelope with silver lettering. Regulus, at the Slytherin table, received an identical card; it seemed to be the only one they had in common this year. Sirius opened the card and smiled. "It's from my cousin Andromeda," he explained as he read it. "Guess she's got nothing to lose in writing me, seeing as she's already been disinherited. She's the one I told you about, Prongs — she's got the kid who's a metamorphmagus? Look, she sent a photo."

"Tippy," James said in approval, taking the photograph from Sirius.

Remus suddenly felt very, very cold. He craned to look at the card that Sirius had set on the table. *Felicitations and welcome to 'adulthood.'* Warm wishes, Andromeda, Ted, and — here were a series of symbols in red crayon, forming roughly the length and shape of a signature, trailing after a painstakingly defined (albeit backwards) 'N' — (*Nymphadora*). No wonder she hated her name by the time she got to primary school... *no, no, no*, he wasn't supposed to know that, that hadn't happened yet. Remus' stomach plummeted.

"Do you want to see?" he heard Sirius ask.

Please no, he wanted to say, but his voice wasn't working.

"Pardon?"

Remus cleared his throat. "Sure," he said. He took the photograph. It showed a cheerful little mopplet digging in the sand with a plastic shovel while her hair, illuminated by summer sunlight, cycled rapidly through the visible spectrum of colours. Remus traced the outline of her face. He knew it; he saw it every night in his dreams. He hid from it every day. It was the face of their child. Time had passed, and Remus had forced himself to forget, forced it deep beyond the reaches of his waking mind. Now here it was, smiling, twinkling, rebuking him for his cowardice. He waited for the onslaught of emotion, pain, tears, screaming.

The pain didn't arrive. He put a hand to his cheek and realised that he was *grinning*. How could he not, looking at that sweet, laughing face? It was a physiological reaction, like catching a yawn.

"Neat, isn't it?" Sirius asked, plucking the photo from Remus' hands. It took everything Remus had not to snatch it back from him.

"Yeah," Remus echoed faintly. "Neat."

"It's hypnotic. Kind of reminds me of that painting you have above your mattress. Hey, do you think she can make her hair glow under blacklight?"

It was a delightful idea. Remus didn't know the answer. They'd never tried it. There were so many things they had never tried together. Perhaps he could test it out on Teddy someday.

Someday. Whenever that was.

It was a shock to the system, remembering. Not that he'd ever *truly* forgotten; he'd only separated the future-past from the present in his mind, night-thoughts from day. He felt that he was reprehensible for remembering, for knowing things he ought not to know. He had tried to be better, tried to relinquish the awful power he held. Perhaps it had even worked for a little while, but there were always cracks in his mental barrier. Tonks' smile had erupted within him like a stick of dynamite and blown that barrier wide open. *Reducto*. There would be no reshaping the rubble back into a wall.

Oddly, that thought didn't frighten him. Perhaps it would come to, later on. For now, though, he

felt clearheaded; clear in his purpose. All along he'd known that he had a purpose, even when he couldn't recall what it was.

Remus speared an egg yolk on his plate and serenely swirled the yellow goo around and around the circumference. He reached for another piece of toast. This was all very good.

"Stop playing with your food," James scolded. "We've got to get to Transfiguration."

"I'm not finished eating. You can go on without me." Without thinking, Remus had broken an unwritten social contract. He only realised it after he'd said the words. This year, Transfiguration and Charms were the only classes that all four of them still shared. If they were to start showing up separately now, who knew what further erosion might follow for their little clique? It was a slippery slope. Better to travel as a pack. Remus left with his friends, soggy toast in hand. They joined the mass movement of students heading off to their first period lessons.

"Sirius!" At the sound of his name, all four of them spun around on their heels and froze. It was like something choreographed in a film — except that James sneezed, and Remus had a fragment of toast hanging from his mouth, and some poor third-year walked straight into Peter, dropping their books, all of which rather spoiled the dramatic effect. The flow of traffic was forced to diverge around their little huddle.

Regulus approached them. From the corner of his eye, Remus saw Sirius place a hand on his wand. They all tensed as one as Regulus reached into his robe, but instead of a wand, Regulus produced a couple of chocolate bars, very expensive and European. Regulus extended the hand with the chocolate. "Happy birthday. From Maman," Regulus muttered, almost shyly.

"No, thanks," Sirius spat. "I'd rather skip the poison this morning."

"It's not poi— They were meant for me," Regulus explained, which was not at all the same as saying *our mother wouldn't poison you*. "I'm keeping the other half for myself."

Sirius gave his brother a long, hard look. "Keep all of it, Regs," he said at last. "Maman's not here. We needn't pretend to play nice anymore. Besides," Sirius uttered darkly, "we both know what you're *really* getting for your birthday this year."

Remus understood immediately what that meant. He wasn't supposed to understand, not yet, but he did, and it gave him a hollow queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Regulus drew back and straightened up. He tucked the chocolate bars back into his pocket. Remus watched a sequence of emotions flash across the young man's face: hurt, anger, fear of rejection fully realised. Sirius was blind to all of it. He could perceive nothing but antagonism from his younger brother. It was too little, too late to change course now.

"Very well," Regulus said curtly. "My congratulations, in any case. I wish you many happy returns of the day."

"Oh, fuck you too, Regs." Sirius turned back around and started walking, which was the cue for the rest of them to follow suit. Then, abruptly, he pivoted. "Whoops, I almost forgot! I've got a gift for you, too." Sirius reached into his pocket, then held out a clenched fist. He dropped a sprinkling of tiny objects into Regulus' reluctantly outstretched hand. They were the silver buttons from the heirloom cloak. They left a scribble of soot trailing from one brother's palm to the other. Regulus snatched his hand back as if he had been burned. His face was livid.

They moved along. Sirius wiped his dirty hand on his trousers. Only Remus lingered a moment too long, and noticed that Regulus carefully wrapped the buttons in his silk handkerchief before

tucking them away.

Sirius wanted nothing to do with the cleaning — most of it, anyway. Box after box of detritus drifted past him, and steadfastly he turned away. Only every once in a while, something would catch his eye, give him pause, and it would almost be enough to make him reach out and touch. A child's toy; a photograph; a ruby glass candy dish. Something fell from one of the boxes and rolled lopsidedly across the floor. Sirius stopped it with his foot. He picked it up and held it to the light: a tiny, tarnished silver button. He stared at it for a long time. Whatever he saw in it was invisible, unknowable to all but himself. He never explained it to Remus. He chucked it in the bin on his way out the door.

It was onerous to observe. It was a burden to understand.

Remus Lupin's Great Big Whoopsie

"Fiona Finlay."

"No."

"Amy Chang."

"No."

"Vicki Levin."

"Keep your voice down! She's sitting right over there. And no."

"Nicola Randolph."

"No."

"Kathleen Brady?"

"*No.*"

"Ingrid Price."

"*No!* God, Padfoot, she's a fourth-year!"

"So?" Sirius shrugged.

"So, I'm not interested in dating *children*, Sirius."

"Well, it's not my fault you've rejected every girl in our year out of hand. Except Slytherins, of course, but if you don't decide on someone soon I might have to start naming them too."

"If I may, why do I have to *decide* on anyone?" Remus was becoming cross.

"Because, as your friend, it's my duty to make sure you're not the only poor sod that shows up to this party without a date."

"I've made up my mind," James interjected. "I'm going to ask Evans to go with me."

"How are you going to ask her, when she's the one that's invited and not you?" Peter asked. James waved dismissively.

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but Lily's already bringing someone," Remus said.

"What?!" James sat up so quickly he might have been spring-loaded. "Who?"

"Camilla Jex-Blake. Hufflepuff prefect. She wants to be a healer, but Slughorn's never paid her much attention, so Lily offered to invite her so that she can ingratiate herself with the Potions set."

"My God, Moony, even *Evans* is bringing a girl to the party," Sirius cried. "But not you. Why do you have to be so choosy?"

"I'm not *choosy*," Remus said. "I just don't want to bring a girl. I'm not interested in *girls*. I'm interested in women." There. Hopefully that would shut him up. Sirius raised his eyebrows. Peter coughed and turned pink.

"All right, Lothario," Sirius drawled. "Sorry they can't all be Diana Vane."

"Who?" Remus asked. All three of his friends gaped at him.

"You absolute cad!" James cuffed Remus on the back of his head. "Tall, leggy, drop-dead gorgeous? Despoiled you of your innocence in the Ravenclaw dorms? Kissed you in front of the whole school? Remember her?"

Remus felt his face grow warm. "Oh. Right. I, err, I didn't call her by her full name." At this, Sirius broke into full-throated laughter. Wonderful. Remus hadn't meant it to sound *quite* so suggestive, but it seemed easier just to let it go. Anything to avoid having to rehash this conversation *again*.

"Say, Moony," James began with blatantly fake nonchalance, "if there's *really* no one you want to bring as a date, you could always bring me."

"Sorry, Prongs, I just don't see you that way," said Remus, smirking.

"Fuck off. You know what I mean."

"You mean so that you can try to corner Evans into talking to you?" Peter asked.

"Yeah, mate, that was the implication," Sirius said, rolling his eyes.

Remus' stomach started to feel squirmy. "I'll think about it," he said.

"That means no," Peter translated, helpfully.

"Why not?" James asked in dismay. "Seriously, Remus, do you have a good reason, or do you just want to be my personal Scrooge this Christmas?"

"I don't think... not inviting people to parties... really fits with Scrooge's *modus operandi*... never mind. All right, James, do you want a straight answer, or do you want me to be appeasing?" Remus steeled himself.

"I want a straight answer that's also precisely what I want to hear," James pouted.

"I'm afraid that's not an option. Look, Prongs, I'd *love* to have you there as my crutch, for all the smalltalk I'll be obliged to make. But do you *really* think you can get through the evening without making a scene?"

"Why would I make a scene?" James raised his voice.

"Exactly — just like that. What are you going to do if Lily ignores you the whole time? Are you just going to hang back and quietly eat hors d'oeuvres?"

"I can control myself, thanks very much! But she's not going to ignore me."

"See, that's the kind of thing I'm talking about. Can you even hear yourself when you talk about her?" Remus sighed. "If I bring you, and you do something to upset Lily, she's never going to forgive me. And she won't be too pleased with *you*, either."

James crossed his arms. "Why would I upset her? That's the last thing I want to do."

“You know Snape is probably going to be there,” Remus pointed out.

“So? I can handle Snivellus.”

“I don’t want you to *handle* him. I want you to disengage, even — *especially* — if he tries to provoke you. And can we *please* stop using that stupid nickname? It’s not even a little bit witty. You sound twelve.”

There. That had been on his To Do list for a while. Never mind that Remus himself had been the twelve-year-old who came up with that stupid nickname. (James had literally fallen out of his chair laughing, and Sirius, wiping tears from his eyes, had declared, “That’s the first mean thing I’ve ever heard you say!” That was what made the joke so amusing, at the time.) He would have liked his friends to stop the name-calling out of common decency, but Remus wasn’t going to wait around for that; embarrassing them would be far more effective. “And anyway, Lily hates it,” he added for good measure.

“Fine. I won’t say it,” James agreed, almost too quickly.

“Not just at the party. I mean for good,” Remus said.

“Of course. You’re right anyway, it’s childish.” At that, Sirius looked miffed, and Peter looked anxious, as he always did when James and Sirius disagreed. “So, I drop the nickname, and you bring me to the party. Deal?”

“I didn’t know we were bargaining over this,” Remus said, raising an eyebrow.

“*And* I promise to extract you from any and all awkward situations. Even if it means walking away from Lily Evans.”

“Well, that does sweeten the deal,” Remus mused. “How will you know when it’s an awkward situation, though?”

“Remus. I’ve known you for six years. Do you really think I can’t tell when you’re faking a smile?”

Remus’ fingers flew to the corners of his mouth. “Damn. I’ve always thought I was quite good at that.”

“Absolutely not,” Sirius chimed in. “I can spot the Fake Moony Smile from a mile away. It’s your signature speciality.”

“Your face kind of does this thing where your eyes glaze over,” Peter added. “Like a doll. It’s a bit spooky. No offence.”

“All right,” Remus groaned. “Fine. James, you promise to rescue me when I need it — *and* don’t get into any fights — and you can be my date to the party.”

James grinned. “I agree to your terms. You won’t regret it.”

Remus regretted it the moment they entered the room. James locked eyes on Lily like a lion targeting its prey — except, in this scenario, the ‘prey’ was a bigger, fiercer lion. Lily was talking

to Severus and didn't even seem to register their arrival. "Come on," Remus said, "let's go get canapés. That's what I came here for. When was the last time you had a canapé? What even are they, exactly? Hey, Prongs, you're posh. What's the difference between canapés and hors d'oeuvres? And is charcuterie something different?" He babbled until he'd managed to break James' line of sight away from Lily, pointing at various things on the table and asking which ones were crudités.

It worked for nearly ten minutes, during which period Remus ate so much, so avidly, that he started hiccupping. He could only detain James for so long, though. After all, James had come with a purpose.

"Evening, Evans!" James approached Lily and Severus. Remus reluctantly trailed behind. With what he probably intended as a cordial nod, James added, "Snnn...ape. Hello."

"Potter," Lily and Severus greeted him in near-unison. Remus bit his lip, trying not to laugh.

"I would have thought even you were above gatecrashing a professor's party," Severus sneered.

"For your information, I was invited. Not that I need to justify myself to you," James said tersely. This was not promising.

"Oh, I'm sure. Couldn't stand to be outside of Potter's shadow for one night, could you, Lupin?" The sneer shifted to Remus.

Before Remus could object, James said, "Yeah, well, at least he had someone to invite!"

"Wrong as usual, Potter. I'm simply not as desperate for attention as you are." It was clear from his emphasis that he was using the plural 'you'.

"Remus," Lily said pointedly, "so good to see you. There's a bit of prefect business I wanted to discuss." Lily grabbed Remus' arm and steered him clear to the other side of the room.

"Don't drag me into this. I'm an innocent bystander," Remus protested.

"Yeah, well, so am I! I'm just standing by while they — they — butt heads like a couple of deer in rut!" Oh, if only she knew how apt that was. Remus felt a rush of sympathy. "And anyway, I'm not dragging you into anything. I'm dragging you away."

"Point taken," Remus said. "It must get exhausting for you."

"It does! It is! God, boys are so *bloody* exhausting!" Lily ground out through clenched teeth. Remus stared at his feet. "Oh, come on, you know I wouldn't have said that if I meant *you*," Lily said. "You're different. You're not..." She trailed off, obviously struggling to find the right word.

"Not attracted to you," Remus supplied.

"Well, yeah, but did you have to put it like that?" Lily chuckled.

"I'm just as bad, though. I brought him here. I'm sorry."

Lily shrugged. "He's your friend. I'm sure he pestered you 'til you agreed."

"That much is true. But still, I knew better." Remus cast about for a way to express his thoughts. It wasn't as if he had some innate understanding of gender dynamics that his friends lacked. He simply had a few decades of experience on them; decades in which he had matured, reflected,

made his own mistakes, and learned from the wisdom of others. Whenever he was at a loss for words, he asked himself what Tonks would say in his situation. He found that his Inner Tonks rarely missed the mark. “I can’t speak for James and I certainly can’t speak for Severus,” he began, “but for what it’s worth... I don’t think either of them are *just* attracted to you, if you get what I mean. They like you for who you are. James is *desperate* to be your friend. Has been for years. He thinks your brilliant. He’d still want to be your friend even if he didn’t fancy you.”

Lily flushed. “Well, he’s got a funny way of showing it.”

“Oh, definitely. He’s been an absolute tosser about it. We’re still working on building those interpersonal skills.” Remus sighed. “I don’t want to make assumptions about how you feel. Just... in case you were worried about it, I thought I should say. You’re not just a pretty face, and anyone who makes you feel that way should get chunked out into the snow.”

“Thanks,” Lily said quietly. “I know that, but it’s good to hear someone else say it out loud. I just get so tired sometimes, Remus. Sometimes I feel like everyone wants more from me than I can possibly give. I’m just one person. I’m only sixteen. I don’t know what I’m doing, any more than they do. Why do they keep looking at me like they expect me to have all the answers?”

“I don’t know.” Remus wanted so desperately to lift the burden from her shoulders. He wanted to tell her everything would turn out fine. He couldn’t. “I don’t have any answers either, but I’ll sit down and have a chat with James, if you want me to. He listens to me sometimes. And just so we’re clear, I’m not trying to excuse his behaviour. You don’t have to like him just because he likes you.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I know that.” She smiled wryly. “I miss being little. Things were simpler. When you’re little, you can just make friends. Just go up to someone and say, ‘Will you be my friend?’ And that’s it. No fuss, no preconceived assumptions, no miscommunication. It used to be so easy to be friends with Sev — Severus. Do you ever wish you could go back and be a child again?”

“I used to,” Remus said. “Not anymore.”

“Miss Evans! Mr. Lupin!” came Slughorn’s familiar bellow. As always, Remus jumped like a cat. “There are my two favourite Gryffindors!” (Nearby, the poor little Gryffindor who had once asked Lily about being muggle-born looked devastated.) “Come, there’s someone I’d like you to meet. Damocles!” Slughorn herded them over to the drinks table, where a bright-eyed fellow in his mid-forties was helping himself to the mulled wine. He lurched a bit unsteadily as he turned to face Slughorn. He was obviously quite merry already. “Snape! Over here, my boy, you too!” Slughorn beckoned Severus with an expansive gesture. Snape dragged his feet over. His expression was dour; no doubt his mind was still fixed on the subject of James Potter. “I’d like to introduce you all to Damocles Belby. Mr. Belby is one to watch — a leading light in the Potions world. He’s been doing the most *interesting* research on... well, I suppose you’re keeping it hush-hush for now, eh, Damocles? I always said you had potential, didn’t I? You could be the finest British brewer of your generation, I said. Of course, he learned from the best.” Slughorn laughed heartily and Belby raised his glass in acknowledgment. They seemed very like-minded, the two of them.

Next, Slughorn introduced Lily, Severus, and Remus. All right. Time to play it cool.

“Can I shake your hand, sir?” Remus blurted. Decidedly not cool. Belby seemed cheerfully bemused as Remus pumped his hand.

“Mark my words, these three will be snapping at your heels soon enough, Damocles,” Slughorn declared. “Haven’t seen so much talent concentrated in one year since 1937. Snape here got a special commendation from the exam board for his Potions O.W.L.”

"My congratulations," Belby said. "They don't hand those out to just anyone." Severus accepted these accolades phlegmatically, but Remus could see the faintest smudge of colour rising in his cheeks. Severus Snape was not immune to flattery. He was still a Slytherin, after all.

"No," Horace confirmed, "they haven't granted a Potions award since you yourself were a student. And three commendations in one year? It's practically unheard of!"

"Three! That's quite remarkable," Belby agreed. Remus watched Severus' expression falter, and couldn't help finding it a *little* funny.

"Remarkable indeed! Charms for Miss Evans here, and Defence for Mr. Lupin."

Belby further extended his congratulations to the two of them. Snape's flush went puce as he levelled his familiar furious scowl at Remus. He obviously hadn't known. Remus smiled back.

Oblivious to this unspoken interaction, Slughorn carried on. "Mr. Snape and Mr. Lupin are the students behind the Pseudoamortentia project, the one I was telling you about."

"Ah, yes!" Belby's eyes lit up. "I do hope you'll be publishing your work. I'll be very interested to read it. Take my advice, it's never too early to start racking up publications."

"Well said. That's sound advice. Fortunately, their co-author happens to have a contact or two at all the major Potions periodicals." Slughorn beamed. "Now, Miss Evans here has proposed a very ambitious research project on prophylactic potions and muggle vaccinations..."

'Co-author?' Remus mouthed, as Slughorn and Belby turned their attention to Lily.

Severus shrugged. "I told you, I had to persuade him before he would lend me the ambergris," he murmured.

"Of course." Remus tried to suppress his amusement.

"You'll still be listed as a contributor," Severus said.

"That's generous. No, I mean it. All I really did was stir. I don't mind being left off the publication."

"Stop that," Severus snapped. "When you say things like that, it makes you sound..."

"Sound what?" Remus asked, taken aback.

"It makes you sound foolish. It's as if you don't *want* people to respect you. If that's the case, it's working," Severus spat.

Remus grew hot with sudden anger. Snape had no *idea* what he was talking about, and the worst part was, anything Remus could say would only reinforce Severus' shoddy assessment of his character. Snape was bloody intransigent. If years of fighting on the same side hadn't altered his opinion of Remus, a clever retort wasn't going to do it now. "I was only being honest," Remus murmured. It sounded pathetic, even to his own ears.

"Ah, yes. *Honest*. Remus Lupin is a *paragon* of honesty."

"Come on, Sev, can't you just lay off him for once?" Lily pleaded, breaking in. For once? What did that mean? Had they been talking about him? *What had Severus been saying about him?*

"You're better than that. I *know* you are."

Severus sneered, not taking his eyes off Remus. “Really, Evans, there’s no need to refer to Lupin as ‘that’.”

“*Severus!*” Lily looked pained.

“It’s fine,” Remus murmured. “Thanks, Lily.” He deflated, feeling guilty. He probably deserved it. His conscience wasn’t exactly clear when it came to Severus, either. Besides, he had known Severus long enough to recognise that last insult as a pure defence tactic. It didn’t really hurt him. Not in the way it wounded him to be called dishonest.

“You’re *welcome*, Remus,” Lily said with unnerving emphasis. Then she turned back to Severus. “See, *some* people actually appreciate it when their friends stick up for them. Even when their friend happens to be *muggle-born*.”

“You know that has *nothing* to do with — ”

Remus suddenly felt that he was intruding on something he wasn’t a part of. He didn’t know what specific incident had sparked Lily’s anger, but he got the sense this was a well-trodden argument between them. Whatever it was, it had ceased to be about Remus. It was time to extricate himself and go lick his wounds elsewhere.

Remus pivoted swiftly, and in doing so, he tripped on his own hem and knocked into Damocles Belby, who was leaning over the drinks table ladling out another helping of eggnog. In the next few seconds, several things happened in rapid succession. Belby swayed and crashed forcefully into the drinks table, which buckled in the middle and slammed against one of the towering Gothic Revival vitrines that lined the wall. The glass shattered and the cabinet toppled forward as its spindly legs gave way. Jars and vials of ingredients slid from the shelves, and the whole mass of wood and jagged glass arced directly toward Damocles Belby. With no time to stop and think, Remus cast a wandless vanishing spell on the vitrine. Severus, who was a quicker draw than him, extended his wand at the same moment. Whatever spell Severus cast collided with Remus’ vanishing spell, and the result was that the body of the cabinet disappeared, the potions vessels exploded, and everything suspended in midair surrounding Remus, Severus, Lily, and Belby with thousands of fragments of broken glass. The four of them froze too, though not compelled by magic. None of them could move without scraping the splintered glass that hung like frost in the air. Belby, already unsteady on his feet and now balanced in a sort of one-armed push-up, was visibly shaking with the effort of holding still. Six or seven interminably long seconds passed. Then Remus heard James behind him, calling out an incantation.

All at once, the shards of glass transformed into droplets of water, which inundated them along with a cascade of potions ingredients. For a moment, Remus was too cold, wet, and shocked to process what had happened. He ran a hand over his face and peeled off a slug that had landed perfectly across his nose. Then he launched himself at James, squeezing him tight. “James,” he said breathlessly, “that was *brilliant*.”

“Can you not?” James complained with a shiver. “You’re sopping wet.” Still, he squeezed Remus back.

Remus withdrew, and to *everyone’s* surprise, Lily bounded forward and hugged James too. “Bloody well done, Potter!” she cried.

James seized up for a moment. Over Lily’s shoulder, Remus watched James’ expression melt from shock to panic to rapture. He didn’t dare put his arms around Lily, but he reached up and gently caressed her hair before flicking something gooey off to the side. “Sorry,” he said, turning red. “Flobberworm in your hair.”

Lily tossed back her wet, slimy head and started laughing. Her laugh was loud, brash, beautiful, infectious. Remus started laughing too, and James, and Slughorn, and even poor Damocles Belby. Remus doubled over, bracing himself with his hands above his knees. He couldn't contain himself. He had nearly killed the future inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion. What could be more hilarious than that?

Only Severus wasn't laughing. He stood stock still, but for a subtle tremor in his hands and a chattering jaw. He looked murderous. His face had gone pasty. Remus reconsidered. No, he didn't look angry; he looked anguished. Remus suppressed his impulse to say something reassuring; it would only make things worse. He was far too frayed himself to risk getting into a fight. He turned his back to Severus.

"Bravo, Mr. Potter, bravo!" Slughorn thundered. He extended a hand to James, who shook it rather dazedly. Remus had a feeling James wouldn't have to wheedle his way into attending next year's Christmas party.

"Horace, come have a look at this," Belby said with excitement. The impromptu cold shower seemed to have done him good; he was both steadier and more animated than before. "A bit of aconite's landed in my eggnog, and it's gone the most interesting shade of violet." (How the hell had he managed to hold onto his drink through all that?)

"Interesting indeed," Horace said sincerely. "Now, we'd best get all this cleaned up before anything spontaneously generates in what's left of the mulled wine."

"I think I'm ready to call it a night," Lily said hoarsely. Then she turned to Remus with a mischievous smile. "Last one to the Prefects' Bath is a pile of newt eyes!" With that, she spun about and practically sprinted for the door. Remus, looking down at his ruined shirt and discovering that he was, in fact, a pile of newt eyes, didn't even attempt to catch up with her.

"She certainly knows how to make an exit," Remus commented.

"Yeah," James said faintly, staring dumbfounded at the door. Then, gathering himself, he looked Remus over and said, "I think that's our cue to leave, too."

They said their polite goodbyes to Slughorn (who tried to insist they stay) and Damocles Belby. Remus looked about for Severus, but it seemed he had already left. He must have gone with considerably less flair than Lily had.

Out in the corridor, James said, "We're going straight to the showers. You look repulsive right now. Wish I had my cloak to throw over you."

Remus grinned. "Will you pick the flobberworms out of *my* hair?" he asked, batting his lashes.

"You wish," James said, giving him a friendly shove.

Remus couldn't remember how they got back to Gryffindor. His head was spinning as he tried to measure the consequences of what had just happened, and what *might* have happened. He was out of control. The whole timeline was bugged. Nothing was safe; no action, no interaction, no matter how trivial it might seem in the moment. Just by standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, he had nearly doomed himself — doomed every werewolf — to a world without Wolfsbane. He had so thoroughly fucked himself over that he was dragging the rest of the world down around him. How was he meant to keep this up for *years*?

On the bright side, it seemed increasingly unlikely that he would make it that long.

“James,” Remus said, stopping outside the showers. “Thank you. You saved me tonight.” He could never explain to James just how truly and deeply he meant it, but he hoped his voice would convey his sincerity.

“Told you I’d rescue you from any awkward situations, didn’t I?” James said cheerfully. “Though if I’d known you were going to be *that* awkward, I might not have made that promise.”

“Liar. You’d do it ten times over if you knew you’d get a hug from Lily Evans at the end.”

“Damn it. You’re probably right. If anyone asks, I completely kept my cool, all right?”

“You were the epitome of cool,” Remus affirmed. “Not at all like a stag in the headlights.”

“Pardon?”

“Sorry. Muggle expression.”

“I hate it when you do that. I can tell you’re making fun of me, but I don’t know *how* mean you’re being. Now, for the love of Godric, will you *please* go bathe? And maybe burn that shirt while you’re at it?”

Agamemnon, and Cassandra

“...fuck off. That never happened. It’s a myth,” Remus heard James say as the door swung open. Remus had skipped lunch in the Great Hall to lounge on his bed and read whilst he ate sandwiches. He wedged his bookmark between the pages, accidentally blotting the paper with butter.

“I swear to God. Left tit in Birmingham, right tit back in Wales. That’s why you’ve got to mind the Three D’s.”

“Are you sure you’re not thinking of bra sizing now?”

Sirius laughed. “They say she was a double D, but now she’s just a single.”

“Well that’s definitely not how bras — oh, hello Remus! Have you signed up yet?”

“Signed up for what?” Remus asked.

“Apparition lessons? Deadline’s tomorrow, you know,” said James.

“Oh. Right. I wasn’t planning on it,” Remus said.

His friends goggled at him. “What? Why wouldn’t you?” Sirius asked.

Remus realised that ‘because I’ve already done it’ was not going to work for an answer. The truth was that he hadn’t given it any thought. He supposed he ought to go ahead and take the damned lessons. It would be tricky to explain, otherwise.

James softened. He lowered his voice, even though they were the only three people in the room. “If it’s about the fee, you know, I’m always happy...” He trailed off awkwardly. Remus flushed.

“It’s not that,” Remus said quickly. The most embarrassing thing was not that James had offered, but that Remus was tempted to take him up on it. He had grown less proud with age, and he was touched, as always, by his friend’s spontaneous generosity. Giving made James happy, and that was a beautiful thing. But that’s not how seventeen-year-old Remus would have thought of it. “I just... forgot,” he continued lamely. “I’ll sign up today.”

Remus was not thrilled at the prospect of spending several weeks pretending not to know how to apparate. Should he try to splinch himself on purpose, just to sell the performance? Good God. One thing he’d learned over the past year was that faking incompetence could be even more taxing than learning new magic in the first place. It was the same reason he’d accidentally scored so high on all his O.W.L.s.

Lucky for him, Remus got to spend that afternoon somewhere he truly did feel incompetent: his Slytherin-Ravenclaw Transfiguration section. One might think that after having been an actual professor, acting as a classroom assistant would be a piece of cake. One would be mistaken. Perhaps it was the effect of being under constant scrutiny from Minerva McGonagall. Perhaps it was that his diminutive body and voice carried far less authority than he’d had as an adult, even on his weakest days. Or perhaps it was because the students in this section were *such* a bunch of little turds.

Well, not all of them. *Most* of the Ravenclaw students weren’t so bad, and Roshanak Rosier was always ready to defend Remus against her fellow Slytherins. Last autumn, she’d had the misfortune of starting her first menses in the middle of Transfiguration class, and Remus had been

the one to escort her to the hospital wing under the guise of a ‘migraine.’ She never actually *told* him what was happening, but Remus had sussed it out pretty quickly from her caginess and air of urgency (not to mention the way she kept her hands clasped behind her as they walked). After a year of teaching at Hogwarts, Remus was an old hand at menarche. He had simply assured her of Madame Pomfrey’s expertise and made her giggle by recounting the time he’d vomited in his cauldron back in second-year Potions. Ever since then, Roshanak had been his little sidekick in class.

Remus wondered where Roshanak fit into the expansive Rosier family tree — or, more precisely, he wondered how closely related she was to Tonks. He also wondered how long it would be before Roshanak’s name was scrubbed from said family tree. It seemed like only a matter of time.

And speaking of convoluted family trees, his greatest nuisance in class was still that snotty little Ravenclaw Vespasian Vane, who (Remus had only recently worked out) was a relative of his erstwhile benefactress Diana ‘Moonbeam’ Vane. Since the beginning of the school year, Vespasian Vane had graduated from grumbling about Remus’ presence to outright hostility. He’d even taken to name-calling when Professor McGonagall was out of earshot, and Remus had had the appalling realisation that his student was actually trying to *bully* him. Honestly. The reasonable part of his mind told him that he should go to Minerva about it, but his stubborn inner voice kept reminding him that he had faced Voldemort’s army and really ought to be able to take an overconfident eleven-year-old. Of course, Vane counted on this sense of embarrassment in order to keep getting away with it. It was like dealing with a Ravenclaw Draco Malfoy. The very idea made Remus shudder.

Things came to a head the day they did mice-into-snuffboxes. As Professor McGonagall went over the instructions, Remus sat at the front of the room reflecting that perhaps they shouldn’t have first-years working with tobacco paraphernalia, and wondering how he might broach the subject with Minerva, especially given it was 1977 and she probably still took smoke breaks in the staffroom. And that wasn’t even getting into the ethics of transfiguring mice into inanimate objects... which was where his train of thought cut off, because someone dropped a mouse down the back of his shirt.

Remus resisted his instinct to spin around. The culprit had obviously used a levitation charm. No doubt Vespasian Vane was sitting at the back of the room with his hands folded primly on the table. Remus could sense rather than hear him sniggering with his friends. Remus, however, had a secret advantage. It wasn’t the first time he’d had a rodent up his sleeve. It wasn’t even the first time that *week*. He calmly unbuttoned his cuff and reached up to rescue the poor little mouse that was trying to burrow in the crook of his elbow. He held it in his hands under the table, petting it with one gentle finger, until there was an opportune break in the lecture.

“Professor?” Remus asked, loud enough for the entire class to hear. “Sorry to interrupt, but I think one of the students accidentally dropped their mouse. This poor little fellow seems really shaken up. He doesn’t want to sit still. Would it be all right to excuse him from the exercise?” Remus held up the mouse, its tiny pink eyes peeping out from the gap between his hands. He heard a chorus of muffled *awws* from around the room.

“Very well,” said Professor McGonagall, irate. She took the mouse from Remus and placed it back in its cage. Then she scanned the room. “Mr. Vane, you seem to be without a mouse. Perhaps it would be safer for you to practice on something inanimate, for now.” She floated a pincushion from her desk over to the sulking first year. “And ten points from Ravenclaw for careless animal handling.”

Remus felt very smug. Not only had the prank backfired, but now Vane’s classmates would see him

as a dastardly Mouse Dropper. Punishment from professors only went so far; approbation from one's peers was much harder to shake. Remus couldn't have planned it better himself.

Despite the challenges, Remus did like working with the first-years, on the whole. Remus had enjoyed teaching at Hogwarts more than anything else he'd ever done. He hadn't allowed himself to brood on it after he'd been forced to leave his post. The pain of losing the first job he'd ever actually liked was too raw, and anyway, there had been *far* more important matters to worry about during the intervening years. It was only now that he finally found time to reflect back. Remus wondered, selfishly, if he could build a career in education after he graduated. Maybe he could find something part-time at a pre-school, somewhere in the muggle realm where no one would notice a pattern in the days he requested off. He thought he would enjoy working with young children.

Of course, that would be flagrantly altering the timeline. But would it really make *that* much difference, if he kept his head down and focused on his work? Couldn't he afford to make *one* small allowance for his own happiness?

That was a dangerous thought. Remus tried to crush it whenever it arose. He'd been in the past too long; he found himself tempted, more and more, to make plans for the future. He couldn't go there. He couldn't assume that he *had* a future. That sort of dream just wasn't meant for him.

What it all came down to was that he missed caring for children. He missed *his* child. He even missed changing nappies and cleaning up spittle and long, sleepless nights. Remus' nurturing instinct, undeterred by his adolescent brain cells, was spiralling without any outlet. Care of Magical Creatures was rapidly becoming his favourite class. He frequently cradled peoples' cats in the corridors — though he'd been trying to break the habit, ever since a fourth-year had discovered him talking to her kitten in the Gryffindor common room and kissing its little pink nose when he thought no one else was around. She had seemed scandalised that her cat was two-timing her.

His habit of transference wasn't limited to animals, though, and that was really beginning to worry him. Whenever he looked at Lily or James, Remus saw Harry. Remus wanted to protect his friends, care for them, help them learn and grow. Remus had forced himself to bite his tongue on several occasions, when all he wanted was to take James aside and speak to him gently, offer advice, share a bit of wisdom he wasn't meant to have earned yet.

Things were even more fraught with Sirius. Sirius, at this critical juncture in his life, was determined to refuse all help; yet that only made Remus want to smother him all the more. Sirius Black was a child forced to grow up too quickly, abandoned to his own devices before he could learn to care for himself. Remus desperately wanted to help him, as he would help any lost child. No — not just any child. In truth, Remus felt particularly indebted to Sirius. He was heavy with guilt, heavy with the knowledge of what lay ahead for Sirius, the long years of terrible suffering to which he had abandoned his friend. Or, rather, to which he *would* abandon him.

Therein lay the crux of the matter. Remus had always loved his friends, of course, but now he was learning to love them all over again, and differently. Now he saw them through an older (if not wiser) man's eyes. A father's eyes. It made it all the more horrific to face what he knew must be done. He was Agamemnon leading Iphigenia to the altar, with sweet words and promises of a bright future.

Remus would do anything, sacrifice anything, to ensure his *own* child's safety; and yet that abominable *anything* was precisely what would make him unfit to raise a child.

He no longer cried when he thought about it. He generally tried not to think at all. Only some days, like Teddy's birthday, it was harder to stop the bad thoughts. That day, Remus took the wool blanket from his bed and snuck out to the Shack in the early afternoon. He'd never been there

outside of the full moon. He'd never wanted to, but that day, it seemed like the perfect place to be alone. He did a bit of spring cleaning while he was there. Why not? He might have torn all the furnishings to shreds, but there was no need to put up with dust and mould. He wasn't sure what werewolf sneezes looked like, but he imagined they were wet and slimy and not very cute.

After dusting, Remus wrapped himself in his blanket and lay on top of the bed covering. He pulled out the photo of Tonks he had rescued from Sirius' vast collection of clutter. In the photo she was three years old, or maybe two. Teddy was two now — at least in Remus' mind, if not in reality. As his notion of time had rather inconveniently unravelled, it was simplest to count by birthdays. Remus had witnessed the birth of his son, then a first birthday, and now a second; ergo, for Remus, Teddy was two. If the number of days he had lived in between didn't quite add up to seven-hundred and thirty... well, Remus wasn't there to do maths. In any case, it felt like aeons.

He stared at the photo. Was that how Teddy would look, too? Remus certainly hoped Teddy would take after his mother; he felt that, of the two of them, she was the considerably more attractive party. It was strange to think that she was out there, somewhere, living in the same world as himself. He wondered what she was doing that very moment. At first it had made him queasy to know that his future wife was presently an infant, but he had grown used to it, as he had grown used to everything strange and extraordinary. Of course, Tonks wasn't really *his* anything. She was her own person, little as she was, and she had lots of living and learning to do for herself before Remus would enter her life.

At least, he hoped he would. That too was beyond his control, and too far distant to plan for. Maybe in this world, they wouldn't get married. Maybe they would never even meet. Maybe she wouldn't fall in love with him a second time. It was a sad thought, but he would understand. Even the first time, her love for him had seemed like a miraculous disruption in the order of the universe.

If Tonks didn't love him, there would be no Teddy. This was a fact Remus could not change, so he refused to torture himself by dwelling on it. No matter how he might try to steer the course of events, Remus knew that in the end, he was only half of the equation. He could try to change the world or he could try to stand back, but he couldn't direct Tonks' heart and mind. He would never want to.

On her fourth birthday, her hair was going to catch fire, thanks to a sudden and untimely morph as she leaned to blow out her four candles. It would leave a small but noticeable scar near her right clavicle. She always told it as a funny story, but Remus imagined it wasn't very funny when it happened. He hated the thought of her scared and in pain. It would take all of his willpower not to break out of school that day and try to prevent the accident. What was he going to do, kick down the door and smash a kid's birthday cake?

Now *that* would be a story. His wife would find it hilarious.

Remus rolled over and looked at the ceiling. It was more stained and dilapidated than it had been a year earlier, that first morning, when he woke up thinking he was still in a dream. What a difference a year could make. A year ago on Teddy's birthday, Remus had suffered a nervous breakdown. After that he had spent several months in denial, constantly disoriented as he strained to repress his memories of the future. Then at last he had confronted his unreal reality, and resolved not to forget again; but still he had avoided thinking about the terrible repercussions of his actions — at least until the night he had nearly done in Damocles Belby. Where did that leave him now? He knew who he was. He knew where he came from and what he had to do. What he must *not* do. Remus looked to the future with disembodied numbness. There was only so much he could feel all at once. Somehow, he still had to live.

Tonight, he would take time to yearn and to mourn. He would swaddle himself like a child, and hide from the world, and indulge whatever dark thoughts came his way. Tomorrow, he would plod on.

Expecto Patronum

If sitting through most of his classes was dull, sitting through Defence Against the Dark Arts was torturous. There's nothing quite like being forced to sit quietly while someone else does your job, poorly. Remus tried to remember whether he'd hated sixth-year Defence so much the first time around, but, tellingly, he couldn't remember anything from that class. At least he had developed a funny sort of camaraderie with Severus Snape, who spent so much time sneering and rolling his eyes at Professor Ellsworth that he almost forgot to sneer at everyone else, for a change.

That was why Remus was utterly caught by surprise when, on a sunny Tuesday in early May, while he was deliberating over whether or not he could fit in a ramble before moonrise, he was suddenly thrown back into a formative lesson from his youth. Remus was simply astonished that *anything* important had ever happened in sixth-year Defence. He'd completely forgotten that he'd first learned the Patronus charm in a sweltering classroom from a flinty old woman who looked as if she'd shown her hairdresser a picture of the Queen Mother and said, 'Like that, but a bit less tawdry.'

"When I was a lass, the Patronus charm was a standard part of the curriculum," she announced. "These days, certain parties feel it's too *advanced* for schoolchildren to learn," she said disdainfully, "but if it's too *advanced* for N.E.W.T.-level students, then the Defence N.E.W.T. has been devalued to the point of worthlessness." Professor Ellsworth *loved* opining on Today's Youth. Remus half-listened as she explained the theory behind Patronus charms. When it came time to demonstrate, she produced a crisply defined silver stoat that scampered from desk to desk. Remus had to admit that her technique was exemplary, but he was rather perturbed when he thought of the ermine-trimmed cloak he'd seen her wear throughout the winter.

Remus still remembered how it felt the first time he cast his feeble, wispy Patronus. He had been flooded with an unaccustomed sense of pride; a sense that, perhaps, he had finally found *something* at which he excelled. It had taken him until the very end of the lesson to get there, but ultimately he was one of the only three students to successfully produce a Patronus during class — the other two being Lily and James, whose results were similarly meagre. Sirius had been annoyed at falling short of James and Remus, but eventually they had helped him master the skill together. Peter wasn't in sixth-year Defence Against the Dark Arts. He hadn't earned high enough marks on his O.W.L. In hindsight, that made sense, Remus reflected darkly.

In fact, their N.E.W.T.-level Defence class was quite small, combining sixth- and seventh-year students from all four Houses. There were two reasons for this system. One was that the O.W.L.s were notoriously difficult to pass. The other was that, with the high faculty turnover rate, it helped to combine years; that way, the seventh-years could recount what had been covered the previous year, which kept the syllabus on relatively consistent biennial rotation.

As the practical portion of their lesson commenced, Remus waved his wand a bit haphazardly, thinking about watery custard and mucky boots. He knew he could not let himself succeed before Lily did. She had done it first, and hers had been brightest, too. In fact, Remus thought it might be wiser not to cast a Patronus at all during class. He *thought* he could keep it contained to a modest wisp, but what if he slipped up and cast a full-fledged Patronus the first time out? He really didn't need to draw any more unwanted attention to himself.

Remus glanced at Severus, who didn't even seem to be trying. Severus had never managed to produce a Patronus in class; Remus would certainly have remembered it if he had. Severus was the only Slytherin from their year taking N.E.W.T.-level Defence, which meant that he was even more

out of place in that room than in their other classes. Still, Severus was normally very studious, if surly. But today he was just flicking his wand with detachment and staring at Lily. He was watching her when the first puff of silver burst from her wand.

Remus turned his attention from Severus to Lily just in time to catch it. It was a beautiful sight. The Patronus was blobbish and vanished quickly, but the expression that lingered on Lily's face was breathtaking. Her lips were parted in a small private smile, her luminous green eyes fixed on something only she could see. You could drown in her eyes, just then.

Now it was safe for Remus to go ahead and cast his Patronus. He couldn't resist. He was generally not a proud or competitive person, but he did pride himself in this. Besides, he had done it the first time around, so it would be altering the timeline if he *didn't* try to show Lily up, just a little. Remus recalled the first time he had produced a Patronus. He had done it by focusing on the moment he learned he'd been accepted at Hogwarts. In order to replicate the result, Remus invoked that same memory now: the joy, the hope, the little shred of doubt and fear that made his feelings all the more delicious. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Nothing happened.

Right. Well, perhaps that had been his happiest memory at seventeen, but an awful lot had happened since then. He went more primal. He conjured up his earliest memory: sitting in the backseat of his mother's Mini, forehead pressed against the window, staring through streaks of rain at the full moon while his father told him fairy stories. They had spent the whole day at the seaside, and when they got home his parents would give him a bubble bath and let him sleep in the big bed with them. Remus remembered it vividly, because it was the last time he had ever seen the full moon. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Still nothing. He sighed in frustration. That one had never failed him before. He always found that a little bittersweetness actually made the charm more potent. Perhaps, though, he had let the bitterness overpower the sweet.

Right. Next. He thought of his quiet, lovely wedding day. He had been so nervous he'd vomited in the sink that morning while shaving; later, when Tonks tried to slide the wedding band onto his finger, he was shaking so badly that she had to use her free hand to hold his steady. Even then, up to the very last minute, he was afraid she would come to her senses and run far away. She had laughed at him, gently. *What's there to be nervous about? We've already gotten through the hard parts. Today, we're just filing the paperwork.* It was a shame Remus didn't have his wedding band, now. He'd grown accustomed to wearing it. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Remus hadn't really expected that one to work. It was a happy memory, but too tinged with darkness. The war closing in around them; the constant fear they felt for one another. The conspicuous absence of friends and family. They had updated their wills the same afternoon, with the same witnesses to their signature. Two with one stone.

Fine. It seemed Remus would have to pull out all the stops this time. He hadn't wanted to go there, for fear the memory would be too overpowering, but the old standbys just weren't cutting it. Remus pictured himself holding Teddy, minutes after his birth. Tiny and wrinkly and misshapen and a bit bluish, not at all like Remus thought babies were supposed to look. The most beautiful little being he had ever seen in his life. Remus was so full of emotion he nearly forgot how to breathe. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Nothing.

How could that be? He didn't *feel* nothing. Never, even in his darkest moments, had Remus failed to produce a Patronus. Panic rose within him. The memories were still there, still intact, still joyful and beautiful. Only, *he* was different. He was all wrong. There was a piece of him missing, an empty cavity in his soul, and all the happiness was leaking out. He understood exactly why his Patronus had abandoned him. He was broken. Impure. Still, he kept trying, growing increasingly frantic in his motions. After several attempts he bit his lip to stop from swearing out loud. Realising he was on the verge of making a spectacle of himself, Remus slowed down and took a deep breath. His lip was bleeding.

In his peripheral vision, Remus caught Severus frowning at him. "*What?*" Remus hissed.

The frown melted into a smirk. "Nothing," Severus murmured back. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Lupin. No one can be *outstanding* at everything."

Smug little shit. Where did he get off? It wasn't as if *he* had managed to conjure a Patronus — in either timeline.

After class Remus felt even sulkier than Sirius, which was a bit embarrassing. In fact, Sirius seemed cheered by the fact that Remus had not managed to produce a Patronus either. James, still riding high from his minuscule success, promised that he would teach both of them how to do it properly. It made Remus want to pour laxative potion in his pumpkin juice.

At least Remus could blame his foul mood on the full moon. It was difficult to hold a grudge, knowing that in the evening his friends would come to rescue him once again.

Yet even in spite of his friends' presence, Remus had a particularly hard transformation that night. In the morning, he awoke with a twisted ankle — an injury caused not by tooth or claw, but by simple carelessness as he tore through the forest. That would be difficult to explain to Madame Pomfrey. For a brief, wild moment, he thought of trying to feign a bite mark to make it more explicable, but the prospect was too grizzly to follow through on.

His friends reported that he had been restless, and had eventually outrun them, in spite of their best efforts to keep pace. Apparently he had even snapped his jaws at Prongs at one point during the night. "Thought I was about to become venison," James joked, but Remus couldn't laugh about it. Remus spent most of Wednesday in bed, indulging dark and monstrous thoughts. He wondered if perhaps he was losing his humanity, little by little. Maybe that was why he couldn't conjure a Patronus anymore.

Thursday morning, when Remus arrived at the Potions lab to brew a much-needed batch of Calming Draught, he was dismayed to find Severus Snape waiting for him at their old workbench. It was already set up, with ingredients neatly laid out on the surface. "Lupin," Severus greeted him, "are you busy?"

"I was planning to be," Remus replied.

"You're not, then. Good. I want to run an experiment. We'll need to start straight away to get it done before Slughorn's eleven o'clock."

"Sorry, I don't remember volunteering myself as a test subject. Aren't you supposed to be in class right now?" Remus thought Severus might say something goading about the fact that Remus knew his class schedule, but then, Severus had evidently known exactly where to find Remus on a Thursday morning, too.

"I skipped it. This is a more valuable use of my time."

"And I suppose you've decided it's a more valuable use of my time, as well?"

"Yes," Severus said seriously. "I think you'll find that it is." While they spoke, Severus began the familiar process of brewing Pseudoamortentia. It looked like he had prepared as much in advance as possible. Where did he find the time? Remus wordlessly set to work beside him. Might as well. He felt rather intrigued, now. It was very annoying.

Remus was concerned he might have forgotten the process after a year, but he must have retained it somewhere in his muscle memory, because Severus wasn't scolding him to redo anything. In fact, Severus looked quite content, at least inasmuch as he ever did. When it came time to measure his pulse, Remus was relieved to find that it was steady, his nerves having quieted while he focused on his work. He and Severus had never managed to sustain a companionable silence for so long before. Of course, the moment he became conscious of it, Remus felt an overwhelming urge to start babbling.

He was rescued by the potion itself, as it began to level out and emit the familiar potpourri of nostalgic scents. "It's ready," Severus said.

"What, already?" Remus was surprised. "But you haven't added the mica. Or the cornflour."

"Well, there's no need, is there?" Severus explained with poorly-feigned patience. "*We* obviously know what's in the cauldron. We're not going to use it as a placebo on ourselves."

"Oh. Of course. And what *are* we using it for?"

"You'll see." Maddening. Remus suspected that Severus was trying to trick him into agreeing to his mystery experiment, and it was working. "Let's let it settle for a few minutes. Stay where you are and make sure you're inhaling the vapours."

Severus closed his eyes, so Remus followed his lead and focused on breathing in and out. Old books. Pine sap. Wool, drenched in dew and sunlight. Cloves. Woodsmoke. Butter. Wolfsbane. (His lips twitched.) His wife. His mother. The indefinable, intoxicating smell of a newborn baby.

"Are you happy?" Severus asked him.

The question was a bolt from the blue. Remus' eyes flew open. "What?" he choked out, his heart hammering against his ribcage.

"You know what I mean," Severus said prosaically. "Are the fumes affecting you yet? Do you feel warm and fuzzy inside?" These last words were spoken with withering disdain.

"Oh." Remus steadied himself. "Erm... yes, actually. I do. I feel pretty good."

"So do I," Severus said, although you certainly wouldn't know it from his expression. Severus pulled out his wand, and for a fleeting moment Remus braced himself. Fortunately, Severus turned and pointed his wand away from Remus. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he uttered softly. The barest hint of silver light flashed around him.

"Oh," Remus said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "*Oh.*" He produced his own wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A spray of light, more powerful than Severus' had been.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Severus repeated, louder this time. The silver lingered in the air a little longer.

“Expecto Patronum.” This time Remus had to rein it in. Laughter bubbled up within him, irrepressible, irresistible. He was almost certain he could produce a corporeal Patronus now, if he wanted to. But he definitely didn’t want to. Not in front of Severus.

Severus turned to face him, and he was *smiling*. Not smirking. Smiling. “I think we’ve found our first practical application for Pseudoamortentia,” he said. He cast another Patronus, easy as pie. “I told you so,” he added.

Remus had the strangest sense that Severus was holding back a bit, too. He was terribly curious to know the reason, but he couldn’t very well ask without giving himself away. In all their years of working with the Order, Remus had never seen Severus’ patronus take shape.

Remus cast a final Patronus and immediately began to fret that maybe, just maybe, it had a little bit of a snout on one end. He didn’t have to worry for long, though, because the silver mist stretched and wrapped all the way around him, cocooning Severus and himself in a whirling cloud of light. The Potions classroom receded into darkness and everything was glitter. Remus’ breath caught in his throat. It was like standing inside an enormous and enticingly scented disco ball. Remus felt light as air, as if his body might disperse into mist and float away, too.

Severus wasn’t smiling anymore. He looked at Remus with an entirely inscrutable expression.

Remus and Severus were almost exactly of a height. Remus had never noticed before; he’d never paid attention. Was that why Severus’ gaze felt so direct, so uniquely penetrating whenever it focused on him? Could that directness, which Remus had always taken as a sign of Severus’ *particular* loathing for him, really be nothing more than a quirk of physiognomy? Remus was so close to that dark gaze now. He’d never stood so close. The permanent furrow between Severus’ brows was growing steeper. His lashes were short and sparse but very, very black. Remus could faintly make out the line where deep brown iris met dilated pupil, and in the pupils he could see his own image mirrored. Pupil, from the Latin *pupilla*, meaning both the centre of the eye and a small child; so called because one can see a miniature version of oneself in its reflective surface. Remus wanted to see better; wanted to see his own face expand to fill the entire circle. He leaned in close. “Can I kiss you?” he whispered. He didn’t even hesitate.

“No.” The little man in Severus’ pupils shrank back, then vanished altogether.

“Oh,” Remus said, looking down at his shoes. “No, of course not. Sorry. Don’t know what came over me. It was just — ” He gestured vaguely at the potion and the dissipating silver mist. He both felt and sounded like he’d just run a lap around the quidditch pitch.

“It’s simply impossible.” Severus’ tone was matter-of-fact. Stern, even, as though he were lecturing a spoiled child.

“Yes,” Remus agreed. He knew that it was, too, though he was obliged to keep his reasons private.

“I’d like you to leave this room now.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Remus gathered his things and walked out.

It *was* impossible. Remus was still, in spite of ever-mounting difficulties, trying to maintain a policy of non-interference with the past. Kissing Severus Snape would definitely count as interference.

And anyway, Remus realised with a sinking feeling, it was not what he wanted; or at least, not *how* he wanted it. He did want Severus Snape. He wasn’t sure when *that* had happened, but he must

have felt it for quite a while on some level, because the revelation didn't shock him. Somewhere along the line, Remus had gone from flinching every time he was grazed by Severus' burning gaze to actively seeking it out, wilfully getting singed. The problem was that he didn't want *this* Severus Snape, this wispy, sullen, rudderless adolescent. He wanted Severus as he'd come to know him later, as an adult, with all of his prowess and hard-earned wisdom and scars. He wanted *that* Severus, the one who might truly understand who Remus was, might really *see* him, if only he would try. He wanted their whole tortuous history laid bare. History was what bound them to one another, hellish as it was. Remus didn't want a clean slate; he didn't want to rewrite their story. It was simply impossible.

Wolf Hunt

“Morning, sunshine!”

“JESUS, Myrtle! In the shower? Really?”

“I have something to tell you. It can’t wait.”

“It can’t wait five minutes? What have we talked about, Myrtle? Boundaries!”

“I need to tell you *in private*, silly.”

Remus flinched away from the stream of water as Myrtle emerged from the shower head, straining through like a fresh batch of noodles before braiding herself back into humanoid form. “Did you come here just to show off that trick?” Remus asked crossly, shivering in the biting air.

“Me? Show off? Is that what you think of me?” Myrtle pouted as she did several loop-the-loops above him.

“You had something to tell me?” Remus prompted, dashing back into the water. It had already started to run cool.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Be at your crying spot tonight by quarter past eight.”

“My *crying spot*?”

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. Be there. Make sure no one sees you coming or going. Cast a silencing spell. Stand up on the toilet so no one knows you’re in there. It’s important.”

“You do realise that’s an absolutely bizarre thing to ask of someone, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Myrtle said impatiently, “that’s how you can tell I’m being serious.”

Somehow, Remus couldn’t fault that logic. “Am I in trouble, Myrtle?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know yet. That depends. Just don’t be late.” With that, she floated off to some other plumbing fixture, leaving Remus nervous, confused, and cold.

Remus turned the water off, but made no move to leave the cubicle. He let the gooseflesh rise on his naked skin, watching with detachment as his body responded to the shift in temperature. All he had wanted was a moment alone to sulk. Was that so much to ask? It had been nearly a week since he’d lost his mind and tried to kiss Severus Snape, and he still hadn’t had time to process what had happened.

Severus had been ignoring him in all of their shared classes. He didn’t pretend that Remus was invisible; Severus would speak to him when strictly necessary, using as few words as possible. That was what made it so unsettling. There had been no sneering, snarling, staring, scoffing, or any other nasty words that begin with ‘s.’ Just bland politeness. Admittedly, Remus was rather relieved to be ignored. He didn’t feel up to a confrontation. In fact, just then, he thought it would be fine if Severus continued ignoring him for the rest of time. The problem was that Remus knew Severus

Snape too well. The man didn't just *let things go*. He was almost certain that Severus was bidding his time until Remus let his guard down. Which might be never, after everything Remus had been through.

Remus wondered what might have happened if it had been the *real* Severus Snape (as Remus still thought of him), adult Snape, Professor Snape, *his* Snape standing in front of him that day. How would *he* have responded if Remus asked to kiss him? The thought sent a surge of warmth through his body. He reached for his towel.

Not Professor, a tiny voice inside his head corrected him. *Headmaster*. He wrapped the towel close around him like a blanket. Well, that thought was sobering enough to fend off any pleasant daydreams he might have had. It was for the best. Remus didn't like to entertain impossible fantasies.

"You took your time in there," Sirius remarked with a lewd gesture when Remus returned to the dormitory.

"Give it a rest, Padfoot. It wasn't funny when we were thirteen and it's still not funny the six-hundredth time."

Sirius shrugged, not looking up from his several-years-out-of-date issue of the *Harley-Davidson Enthusiast*. "I live in hope. One day the joke's going to land."

A little before eight o'clock, Remus got ready to slip out of the dorms. He searched for the Map, but it was missing from its usual hiding place. Honestly, of *all* times for Peter to decide he wanted an evening snack. Remus would just have to do without. He wavered over whether to tell James and Sirius where he was going, but decided against it. If he wanted to go unnoticed, it might be best to leave them out of it. He considered trying to take James' invisibility cloak, but he didn't think he could purloin it without James noticing. Instead, he disillusioned himself in a dark alcove. Remus wasn't supposed to know that spell yet, but what did it matter, if no one could — well — see him?

He did wonder if he was being led into some kind of trap. But why would Myrtle do that? She liked him... didn't she? Maybe he shouldn't have been so snappish with her about the whole shower thing. His stomach flipped.

By ten past eight, he was standing on top of the toilet seat in the last stall of the ground floor boys' lavatory, feeling utterly ridiculous. He worried at a loose thread on his invisible sleeve while he waited for something to happen.

A few minutes before eight-thirty, he heard the door open and a pair of squeaky shoes walked into the room. He listened to them pace impatiently for several minutes. Their tread was light and quick. It was someone small.

At last, a second person entered the room. More of a scuffling sound. "About time," Squeaky Shoes grumbled.

"Sorry if I didn't want to get a detention over... whatever this is," Scuffles replied in a thin, pre-pubescent voice. It sounded familiar.

"Couldn't risk someone overhearing us." Remus now recognised Squeaky Shoes as Vespasian Vane. That figured. He probably thought he was being so sneaky, planning a secret meeting in the loo. It wasn't even past curfew yet. *Amateur*.

"Get to your point, then," said Scuffles, who Remus now recognised as one of the first-year

Slytherins.

“It’s about Lupin. We’re finally going to nail him. I’ve been working on this for months.”

“I know. You won’t shut up about him. Are you sure you don’t fancy him or something?”

“Oh, piss off. D’you want to hear what I’ve got on him, or not?”

Remus held his breath.

“Go on.” Scuffles sounded reluctantly interested.

“You know how he’s always missing class, even though it’s *supposed* to be his job, or whatever?”

“Yeah. Only time I don’t have to listen to your whinging all through class.”

“Well, have you noticed a pattern to it?” There was a dangerous edge to Vane’s voice now.

“Not really. I’m not obsessed with him like you are.”

“Maybe if you were, you would have noticed the obvious.” Vane paused, as if for dramatic effect.

“Full moons.”

“What?”

“The days he’s missing. It’s always before the full moon. I wanted to be sure, so I’ve been keeping track since last December. It’s the same every time.”

“You’re off your rocker,” Scuffles said, but there was doubt in his voice.

“You know I’m not. Think about it. Where do you think he got all those scars? Why does he always look so beaten up? And I swear I’ve seen him *sniffing* other students when he thinks no one’s looking.”

Well, that last part was patently untrue and actually quite offensive.

“That’s horrible.” Remus could hear the shudder in Scuffles’ voice. “So what can *we* do about it?”

“Tell. Obviously.”

“Tell who? Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course not. He’s obviously McGonagall’s little *pet*.” Oh, yes, very witty, how original. “We can’t trust the professors. If they let something like *that* in the school in the first place, who knows what else they might do to us?”

“Then who can we tell?”

“*Everyone*.”

There it was. Remus felt lightheaded. He stuck out his arms to steady himself against the stall.

“All right. We tell everyone. How? Are we going to print a newsletter or something?” Scuffles sounded a bit exasperated now.

“See, that’s what I brought in a Slytherin for! I knew you would figure something out,” Vane said smugly.

“And here I thought you brought me in because I’m your friend. All right, look, if we don’t go now we’re going to miss curfew. I can’t start getting detentions now; I’m going to be Head Boy one day. Let me think about it and we can make a plan tomorrow.”

“Fine. But it has to be tomorrow. I don’t want to wait on this. What if we wait too long and he ends up eating Rosier or something?”

Scuffles snorted. “Then he’d be doing us all a favour. But, I take your point. Tomorrow.”

They parted ways. Remus waited for both sets of footsteps to exit the room. Then, to his horror, he realised the squeaks were moving toward him, not away from him.

The handle on the stall door jiggled. Remus was frozen to the spot.

“Doesn’t *anything* work properly around here?” he heard Vane grumble to no one in particular. Vane went into the neighbouring stall. After all that, Remus had to suffer through the final indignity of listening to his tiny would-be executioner take a dump right next to him. Vane didn’t even wash his damned hands on the way out. What was *wrong* with that child?

When it was finally safe to exit, Remus was shaking from limb to limb. He slumped against the tiled wall, unable to trust his legs yet. *Tomorrow*. The children wouldn’t try to ruin his life without a full stomach and a good night’s sleep.

At least he finally understood why Vane hated him so much. It may have started out as a bit of pre-teen bravado, establishing the pecking order, chafing against authority and all that, but it had clearly evolved into a deeper enmity. It had troubled Remus, and, if he was truly honest with himself, it had wounded him. He didn’t like to be disliked. Now he knew it wasn’t personal; it was just your average, run-of-the-mill prejudice. It was almost a relief.

Almost. Not quite. Now Remus knew for certain that he could not afford to let his guard down, even for a moment.

There was just one thing left to do. Remus looked about for a moment in confusion. He had never needed to go looking for Moaning Myrtle before. She had always come to him. Feeling very silly, he stood up and leaned over a sink. “Myrtle?” he called down the drain. His face turned pink as he held his position. No answer. He tried one more time. “Myrtle? Are you there?”

“Go away, Remus Lupin. It’s past my bedtime,” came the faint response, reverberating up through the drain. Remus snorted. That was rich, coming from her. Then again, he supposed even ghosts needed their Alone Time, although he questioned whether she had an actual bed.

“I just wanted to thank you,” he called. “For warning me.”

“All right, petal. Get some sleep.”

“You too. Erm — I mean — good night, Myrtle.”

“G’night. See you in the bath.” With that, she let out a ghostly yawn that faded into silence.

Remus kept himself disillusioned all the way back to the tower, and because of this he was far less careful than he should have been, stomping and kicking his feet in the empty corridors to soothe his agitation. One thought echoed through his mind. *I’m going to murder Severus Snape*. In the end, all that bother about the full moon and the Shrieking Shack had been for nothing. He would do it with his bare human hands.

Remus didn't sleep at all that night. He spent a few hours pacing in the common room, once he had finally given up on the idea of rest. He had to stop himself several times from going after Snape right then and there. If Remus wanted to convince people that he wasn't a danger to the students, breaking down the door to the Slytherin dormitory at three in the morning probably wasn't the wisest approach.

Remus slipped out early before his friends had risen, and skipped breakfast to stalk about the grounds for a bit. He knew he must look appalling, half-delirious as he was from lack of sleep, and the morning drizzle that saturated him didn't do his appearance any favours either. Shortly before nine, he took up his position, lurking near the Arithmancy classroom and pretending to study a large Dutch landscape painting. He counted the cows in the pasture (twenty-three). Fortunately, Snape was the type to arrive ten minutes early. As soon as he saw that distinctive dark blur in his peripheral vision, Remus whirled about and caught Snape by the sleeve. "Come with me," Remus growled, as low as possible.

Snape ineffectually tried to jerk his arm away, but Remus had a firm grasp on the fabric. "Excuse me, Lupin. I'm on my way to class."

"Skip it," Remus said. "This is a more valuable use of your time." Remus tugged the sleeve.

Snape looked around sharply to make sure they hadn't been seen. He was evidently struggling to maintain his façade of polite indifference. "It had better be," he murmured. "Take your hands off me now, Lupin."

Lupin steered Snape all the way down to the Potions classroom, watching him the whole time to make sure he didn't make a break for it. They stepped into the room. A few O.W.L. students were already there, setting up their equipment. Lupin schooled his face into his best apologetic smile. "I'm so sorry," he announced to the room. "Professor Slughorn sent me to tell you that he's had to cancel lab hours this morning. There was a bit of a mess in here yesterday that needed to be cleaned up, and now he has to de-fumigate before his first lesson." The fifth-years looked like they wanted to object, but the combination of Remus' confidence, his shiny prefect badge, and the off-putting presence of Severus Snape seemed to persuade them. They packed up and left, though not without a lot grumbling.

"De-fumigate?" Snape echoed as soon as the fifth-years were out of earshot. "That's not a word. I'm not even sure it's a concept." Remus slammed the door shut and locked it. Snape glanced nervously at the doorknob, inching closer to the exit. One week earlier they had stood in this very room and created something beautiful together. Now Snape crossed his arms over his chest. "All right, Lupin, you've got my attention. What do you — "

Remus turned on him. "*What have you done?*" he shouted. It sounded much more shrill than he meant it to, ringing in his own ears.

Snape started backwards, bumping up against the door. He looked genuinely shocked. "What?"

"What did you say to them? *What did you do?!*"

"It would help if I knew who you were talking about," Snape retorted, rallying a bit, although he still seemed apprehensive.

“Don’t even fucking try to play dumb now. I can’t believe you’d stoop so low as to get first-years to do your dirty work. But why? Why am I surprised by any of this?”

“*Muffliato!*” Snape uttered quickly. “Well, I’d hate to ‘fucking play dumb,’ as you put it, but I assure you I’m just as surprised as you are right now. Probably more so, since you’re the one that ambushed me.”

Remus was pacing again, as he had all throughout the night. He barely even heard Snape’s response. “So, how long have you been planning this? That little creep said he’d been preparing for this since *December*. When did you start dropping hints? I suppose you probably started with the Slytherins, but they were too thick to pick up on it. God,” Remus cried, standing still for just a moment to look directly at Snape. “All this time — all this time, I was stupid enough to think we were becoming *friends*. I suppose you needed some way to gather evidence, though. You’ve always been so *meticulous* with your research,” he spat. Remus paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. “But then, maybe you were a bit more hands-off than that. Set things in motion, sit back, watch how it all plays out. Well, you’ll be pleased to know your little scheme has finally come to fruition. By tomorrow morning, the whole school will know.”

“Lupin, I don’t know what you’re raving about,” Snape said coolly, “but whatever it is — what makes you think I had any part in it?”

“Because — because...” Remus faltered. *Because you’ve already done it once before.* That was the truth, but he couldn’t very well *say* it. He was caught out, panting, feeling like a caged beast. He was furious. There was nothing he could say out loud, and he was *furious*.

Snape’s mouth became a straight, hard line. “*Lupin.*” He began to speak very deliberately. “Whatever it is you believe I said — whatever you *think* I know — it would be very imprudent of you to speak any more about it, in case you’ve guessed incorrectly.”

Remus shuddered. “Are you threatening me?”

“No. You sound paranoid. You’re the only one threatening yourself.”

“I wish that were true.” Remus felt cold, suddenly, as his angry flush receded. No, Snape was not threatening him. He was warning him. Remus felt incredibly foolish. He still doubted Snape’s innocence, but what did that matter? Remus had come perilously close to blowing his own cover. Why should he worry about a couple of students spilling his secret, when he could apparently be goaded just as easily into confessing it himself?

When had he lost all his self-control?

“I’m going to walk out of here,” Snape said, “before anyone comes along and tries the door. You will not speak of this conversation to anyone, if you have any common sense at all. I suggest you go about your day and draw as little attention to yourself as possible. There’s no need to rush out and crucify yourself, just because you’re afraid someone else might get to it first.”

Snape’s words hit uncomfortably close to home. Much as he wanted to deny it, that was exactly what Remus had been trying to do. He was angry, and scared, and his sense of self-preservation had gone right out the window. Somehow, everything had gone topsy-turvy on him. Remus had flown off the handle, and Snape was being calm and rational.

“And go take a nap,” Snape added, just to drive home Lupin’s humiliation. “You’re swaying on your feet like a drunk.”

Remus did take a nap, but he couldn't spare enough time to make it worthwhile, and he only felt more dull-witted and miserable when he awoke. Worst of all, he still had to sit through Slytherin-Ravenclaw Transfiguration with Judas Iscariot Vane himself. Remus responded the only way he knew how: by acting unfailingly, solicitously kind to the boy. He doubted it would really be enough to make Vane change his mind, but perhaps he would at least feel a bit guilty about destroying Remus' life. And even if not, Remus was determined to get through this ordeal with a clean conscience. He even helped Scuffles earn five points for Slytherin from Professor McGonagall.

By early evening, the knot in Remus' stomach had expanded to fill his entire upper body. He was tempted to skip supper, having no appetite anyway, but then he reflected that he didn't know when he might get such a nice meal again. He dodged his friends, as he had been doing all day, instead approaching the Great Hall from the library. As it turned out, Remus was fortunate Sirius wasn't with him when Regulus Black called out to him in the corridor.

"Lupin! Do you have a moment?" Regulus' tone was not only polite, but downright cordial. That was the first sign that something was off.

"Certainly, Black. What can I do for you?" Remus still felt odd calling Regulus by his surname, but Regulus, ever the traditionalist, considered this formality *de rigueur* as a mark of respect. More to the point, it still felt odd to speak to Regulus at all. Remus knew him so well as a character from Sirius' childhood stories, and yet so little through firsthand experience.

"Let's go somewhere less busy." Regulus gestured for Remus to follow him. It was only then that Remus realised Vespasian Vane and his Slytherin lackey were trailing after them. His heart plummeted. He thought Regulus might dip into an empty classroom, but they stopped once they reached a quiet corner. Apparently, Regulus did not think this conversation warranted absolute privacy.

"Right then," Regulus said as he came to a halt. "Greengrass! Vane! I believe you have something to say to Lupin here?"

The two boys stood a few paces behind Regulus, both looking as if they were being dragged off to have a tooth extracted. Remus' heart beat rapidly. He nearly missed the subdued, "Sorry."

"Sorry?" Remus repeated, keeping his expression neutral.

"Yes. Why don't you explain to Lupin why you're apologising?" There was a tense silence. Scuffles Greengrass looked expectantly at Vane, jaw jutting out in an exaggerated moue, but Vane kept looking at the floor, defiant. "Greengrass?"

Greengrass was obviously much more intimidated by Regulus than Vane was. "We were planning a prank," he muttered through gritted teeth. "It was wrong of us. We're sorry."

Regulus turned to Remus, looking more apologetic than either of the first years. "I intercepted an appalling little... handbill that these two were planning to circulate around the school. I won't trouble you with the details, but it was rumour-mongering of the most shameful sort. Suffice to say they've been severely reprimanded. I reported each of them to their respective Heads of House, and fifty points each have been deducted from Slytherin and Ravenclaw. Greengrass! Tell us why Professor Slughorn gave you detention."

"Because," Greengrass recited, turning first red and then purplish, "my actions were unbecoming to the dignity of Slytherin House." Vane snorted, and Regulus turned on him with a stern look.

“And...?” Regulus prompted.

“...and showed disrespect for an upperclassman, and a prefect,” Greengrass concluded, now looking rather ill.

“That will do,” Regulus said, “for now. Let this be a lesson never to be swayed by base jealousy. That kind of behaviour is not tolerated here at Hogwarts. Vane, Greengrass, you are dismissed.”

“Thank you, Regulus,” Remus said, too stunned to remember to use his surname. “It sounds like it was nothing more than a misguided bit of mischief. No harm done. I think they’ve received sufficient punishment.” Remus realised he had been granted a reprieve, and he didn’t know where to go from there. The first-years hurriedly scuffled and squeaked away.

“Of course. It’s my duty as a prefect.” Regulus smiled and drew closer. Remus froze in confusion as Regulus genially clapped a hand on his shoulder, as if they were old friends. It was so incongruous, so surprising, that Remus nearly missed the subtle way Regulus twitched his sleeve, flashing the unmistakable brand on his left forearm. He leaned in close, close enough that his buoyant curls tickled the side of Remus’ face, and whispered so softly it was barely more than a breath: “Change is on the horizon. Your kind will not be forgotten.” Then, in a fluid motion, Regulus squeezed Remus’ shoulder and carried on past him, headed toward the Great Hall. “See you at the next prefects’ meeting,” he said in his normal voice.

Remus nearly buckled at the knees. He felt as if all the air had been knocked out of him. Instinct told him to brace his body against something solid, but he fought it. He couldn’t risk anyone seeing him react to what had just happened. At least now there was no reason to force himself to go eat. Instead, he made his way back to the library, desperate to find a quiet corner and a pleasant book to distract himself with.

Somehow, he felt that he had escaped the frying pan and landed in the fire.

Gilding the lily

"I don't know. What about the green? I like the green better."

"It brings out your eyes," Remus noted approvingly.

"Oh, sure, Lily," said Mary MacDonald, rolling her eyes. "Go on. Show up to the Gryffindor-Slytherin match wearing green. That's just great."

"Oh, right." Lily cringed humorously. "Sorry. I forgot. You can tell I don't go to a lot of these." She held up a bright red sundress. "I just feel like this is a bit much, for a quidditch match. Don't you?"

"It's not just a quidditch match," Mary pointed out. "It's Gryffindor versus Slytherin for the House Cup. There's no such thing as too much."

"The red is very pretty," Remus agreed. He sat on the floor at the foot of Lily's bed. Remus had been appointed as a nonvoting member on the Committee to Decide What To Wear (to the Most Important Match Of All Time), and he took his duties very seriously. Lily was the only one who still hadn't made her decision.

"What if it gets too cold?" she fretted.

"Bring a jumper," Mary said.

"Lily, I think you should wear whatever you feel most comfortable in," Remus said. That was his role. He wasn't there to opine, lest he be banished forever from the sixth-year girls' dorm, and he liked it there. It wasn't any tidier or better-smelling than the boys' dorm, as he might once have assumed, but it was much more colourfully decorated. And he liked being invited in.

Lily stood, facing the floor-length mirror and holding up her red sundress. "You're right. The sundress is better for the occasion. I'm going with the sundress. Remus, close your eyes on pain of death." Remus left the room.

When he was permitted to enter again, his breath caught in his throat. Lily *did* look stunning in the sundress. Lily tied her hair back with a rayon scarf; the wind inside the quidditch stadium was notorious. She had a faint suntan on her hands and face from sitting outside in her school robes. Remus just hoped James' brain wouldn't melt down until *after* the match.

"What do you think?" Lily asked nervously.

"You look like a model," Mary gushed.

"I think you look nice," Remus said. Suddenly, he had a stroke of inspiration. "I have an idea," he said. "Wait here for a minute." He ran to his own dorm and summoned the little pot of body glitter that had been tucked away in his trunk for the past year. Returning to the girls' dorm, he held it up and said, "Gold. Erm, if you'd like. I guess maybe it's a bit theatrical for a quidditch match..."

"Yes, please!" Mary seized the jar from him. "I love the theatre. This is pretty. May I?"

"Of course."

Mary approached the mirror. She skilfully applied the gold pigment to her eyelids and cheekbones.

It suited her. "That's going to look gorgeous, glittering in the sun," she said. She turned to Lily. "Can I do you?"

"Oh... I don't know. I don't wear makeup," Lily said, almost looking shy.

"It's not makeup," Mary argued. "It's Gryffindor pride. Come on, it'll look so cool with your dress. Please?"

"Fine," Lily said, not looking too put out. Sitting on the bed, she tilted back her head as Mary leaned over her and smeared a light layer of glitter across her cheeks.

"There," Mary said. "Subtle. Unless you want me to draw a lion on you."

"Do that! That sounds cute," Lily said quickly. Mary shrugged and drew a cartoonish lion's face with a big fluffy mane on Lily's left cheek. Lily seemed much more comfortable with that.

"Remus?" Mary asked, returning the jar to him.

"Oh, yes!" Lily exclaimed. "It'd look so nice!"

"Gold would complement your hair," Mary said matter-of-factly, "and your eyes."

"Oh. Erm..." Remus' stomach knotted. He wished he could join in the fun, really he did, but while the glam aesthetic might have been old news in some parts of the country, he wasn't so sure that the Hogwarts student body of 1977 was ready to accept a boy wearing makeup. Weekends excepted, cosmetics were still banned even for female students. Still, it meant more to Remus than he could say that they had offered to include him. "I'd better not," he said reluctantly.

"Right, of course," Lily agreed with a look of understanding, and thankfully no more was said on the matter.

Just before they went into the common room, Lily stopped Remus and quietly asked, "Do you think I look all right?"

"You look good," Remus said.

"Yeah, but, I want you to tell me... as a boy? How do I look?"

"As a boy?" Remus smirked in amusement.

"You *know* what I mean."

"As a boy... I think you're going to knock him dead."

Lily's mouth twitched upwards. "I don't know who you mean," she said.

They joined up with the larger mass of Gryffindors moving toward the quidditch stadium. Sirius had eventually come round after a horrible row with James the night before in which he had threatened not to attend at all. James had been hurt, really hurt, that Sirius was not more enthusiastic about the match. Remus, however, thought he understood the reason. Regulus had made Seeker that year, and Sirius clearly resented his younger brother's meteoric ascendancy. Seeker, prefect, and Black family heir, all in one year. *And Death Eater initiate, to boot.* No wonder Sirius wanted nothing to do with the Slytherin quidditch team. Still, in the end, his love for James won out over his anger toward Regulus. Thank God.

Remus hung close to Lily as they made their way across the grounds. He was uncomfortable with

Sirius' glowering and Peter's unaccountable sulking. Suddenly, Remus remembered the words Minerva had spoken to him the year before. She had been right after all; it really *was* advantageous to have more than three friends.

And speaking of which, they ran into Severus on their way to the stadium. Remus looked about frantically, but (mercifully) there was no sign of Sirius or Peter. "Hello, Sev!" Lily called out.

"Lily," Severus said, with a distinct absence of unpleasantness.

"Ready to get trounced today?" Lily asked brightly.

Severus shrugged. "It makes no difference to me," he said.

"Ha! Still pretending you're too cool to care about quidditch?" Lily teased.

"Same as you," Severus said.

"Not at all," Lily corrected him. "The difference is: I don't care a whit about quidditch. You actually do; you just don't want people to know it."

Severus shrugged again, but a small smile tugged at his lips. Remus' heart skipped a beat.

"Do you want to come sit with us?" Lily asked, hope in her voice. "We can do a running commentary. It'll make it so much less boring."

"Thanks," Severus said, "but I'd rather not be slain in my bed by my housemates tonight."

"Yeah," Lily said, as if she had been expecting that answer. "I understand. Maybe you can make an appearance at our victory party, though?"

"That's a bold presumption."

"Well, that's how we do things in Gryffindor. Bold, gold, and... oh! You'll need to be told, though." She leaned in close and whispered in his ear.

"All right," Severus said, still smiling that opaque little smile. "Fine. We'll see. And just so you know, you're most definitely *not* invited to the Slytherin victory party."

"Wouldn't show up if you paid me," Lily said cheerfully. "Enjoy the match!"

They parted ways, Lily and Remus headed to the Gryffindor stands, Severus going in the opposite direction. Severus had not so much as glanced at Remus the entire time.

"I gave him the Gryffindor password," Lily explained, though Remus hadn't asked. "If anyone has a problem with it, they can take it up with me."

"If anyone has a problem with it," Remus said, "they wouldn't dare."

A smile was still playing on Lily's lips as they settled into their seats beside Mary, Peter, and Sirius. Abruptly, Lily turned to Remus. "Did you talk to him?" she asked.

"Who?" Remus asked, confused. "James?"

"No. Severus."

"About what?" Remus' throat went dry. He wasn't sure he wanted to have this conversation in the

midst of the entire school population — or at all — and yet, it did make a certain sense. The sounds of the crowd ensured that even Peter, seated directly to Remus' left, could not overhear what they said.

"About... you know..."

Remus shook his head, a flush rising to his cheeks.

"Oh. Really? I was *sure* it must have been you. Only because he's been so much more... well... communicative, since the two of you became friends."

"Has he?" Remus asked weakly. Lily thought that he and Severus were friends? Obviously, Severus hadn't *communicated* with her yet about their horrendous falling out.

"Mmhmm. Not to anyone else, mind you, but with me, when we're alone. It's almost like it used to be. It's like... like I have my best friend back."

"Oh." Remus was surprised to feel tears prickling at his eyes; tears of joy, for once. Lily just looked so *happy*, like a weight had been lifted from her. Her smile went straight to Remus' core. "Lily, I'm so glad. I had no part in it, though."

Lily shrugged. "If you say so. Listen to this, though. Last weekend, when we were at Hogsmeade, we had a long chat. He finally told me that he had feelings for me. I mean — I sort of knew, right? But we've never actually *talked* about it. I've always felt rotten about it, like I should say something, but — what was I supposed to say? 'Hey, Sev, have you heard the rumours about us? Not saying you fancy me, but if you do, I just wanted to tell you I don't feel the same.' I mean, I would have felt like a complete twat."

"Yeah," Remus agreed, "I don't think he would have liked that very much."

"But still, I should have, shouldn't I?" Lily pressed on. "I should have said something first. I was just scared. It was cowardly not to. Don't you think?"

Remus shrugged. "I'm not going to call you a coward, Lily. I'm not really in a position to pass judgment." In fact, it amazed Remus how much more skilled Lily was at articulating her feelings at sixteen than he had been, well into his thirties. "So... what happened?" Remus tried not to sound as desperately curious as he felt.

"He told me he used to fancy me, for a long time, but he doesn't anymore. And we talked about it for a while." Remus let out a deep breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding in. He felt almost as relieved as Lily looked. He preferred not to interrogate those feelings. "And he asked if we were still best friends. Then I called him an idiot for even asking, because of *course* we are." She spoke with warm affection. Remus thought that Lily Evans was the only person on earth who could call Severus Snape an idiot and get away with it. Even the Dark Lord himself wouldn't dare.

"Well, I'm glad you were finally able to talk about it."

"Me too. You *really* didn't have anything to do with it?"

"I promise you, Severus and I are not that close."

Lily hummed thoughtfully. "It's not that I had a problem with it," she added. "As long as it wasn't a problem for *him*. But it sort of felt like it was, you know? Like there was this wedge between us. It's difficult..." She hesitated, as if she wasn't sure how much she wanted to reveal. "It's difficult to see someone you love sad, or angry, or hurt, and know that you're the one causing it. And there

was nothing I could do to stop him hurting — unless I were to lie to him, or push him away. I didn't want to do either of those things."

"No, of course you didn't. It wouldn't have been right. Lily, people are complicated. Sometimes, we hurt, and it's not anyone's *fault*. Now you've cleared the air; that was very brave of both of you. And it sounds like he doesn't hold anything against you."

"Remarkable, that. I don't know if you've noticed, but Sev *can* hold a grudge." They both laughed. Then Lily looked askance at Remus. "You're not going to tell anyone about this, are you?" Remus knew exactly who she meant by *anyone*.

"God, no. I'd sooner swallow a Bludger. Honestly, Lily, I'm not even sure you should have told *me*. I don't think Severus would like me knowing all this."

"Well, in my defence, I did think you were behind it. And it's not like I've told you any of the details. Besides," she added archly, "I'm not gossiping. I just thought it might interest you to know." Remus quickly looked away, out toward the quidditch pitch. Maybe she didn't mean anything by it. He wasn't sure he wanted to find out what Lily knew, or thought she knew, about his relationship to Severus. Not when he scarcely knew himself. Fortunately, he found the perfect excuse to end the conversation.

"Oh, look," Remus cried a little too loudly. "The game's started."

"Has it?" Lily asked. "Well, that's awfully rude of them. I was wondering why it was getting so hard to hear you."

It was a tense match, with Slytherin and Gryffindor tied until the very end, when both Seekers spotted the Snitch in the same instant. It seemed a sure thing for Regulus, who started out closer to the Snitch, but somehow the Gryffindor Seeker managed to nimbly cut him off at the last moment, winning the day. Sirius shouted himself hoarse. Even Lily leapt out of her seat to cheer, flushed and breathless.

Somewhere along the way back to Gryffindor, Remus lost sight of Lily. He went arm-in-arm with Sirius, who was radiantly ecstatic — though whether he was more delighted by Gryffindor's win or Regulus' defeat was hard to determine.

The atmosphere in the Gryffindor common room was lively, but not raucous; after all, there were first-years all about. Some seventh-years had had the foresight to stock up on butterbeer and fruit juice, and as it was such a hot and sunny afternoon, the house elves indulged them by delivering big vats of ice cream to the common room. (Remus chose *tutti frutti*. Sirius scooped himself a heaping portion of chocolate, and Peter, unable to decide, took some of each flavour.) All of the students were a bit windswept and sticky. The smell of sweat and body odour hung heavy in the air, but no one seemed to care; they cracked open a window and carried on. Sirius entertained a crowd of adoring underclassmen by recounting heroic tales of previous years' matches. Remus felt a sudden pang, watching his friend; it reminded him of the way Sirius had been with Harry. Unlikely though it seemed, the man had uncovered a sort of natural knack for interacting with children. Remus was certain that Sirius could have honed that knack into expertise, if he had only been given the chance. Remus wondered if Sirius had ever wanted children of his own. He had never thought to ask.

Remus' train of thought was broken as James entered the common room and was met with a round of cheers and applause. No one seemed to notice Lily slinking in behind him. She made for the periphery of the room, while James walked straight into the centre. Remus couldn't help but observe that the lion on her face had shed quite a lot of its mane. Nor did he miss the fact that

James' face had a distinctive golden glow, and not just the metaphorical glow of victory. Glancing over at Sirius, Remus knew that he had noticed, too. Sirius' eyes were sparkling, and his lips were drawn in, as if he were trying to physically restrain himself from commenting.

This was all very intriguing. In Remus' memory, Lily and James had not become an item until the autumn of seventh year. But then, didn't they deserve as much happiness together as they could get? What difference could a few additional months make? *Other than potentially altering their whole dynamic, the timeline of their relationship, their marriage, the birth of their child, the fate of the wizarding world...* Somehow, in that moment, it all seemed a small price to pay for the smile on James' face.

The party had been going on for nearly an hour when the portrait door cracked open and a slight but conspicuous figure slipped inside. Severus had had the good sense to remove any Slytherin regalia from his person, but he still stuck out like a sore thumb. Lily hurried toward him, enveloping him in a hug. A human shield. She couldn't stop the hush that fell around them, though. James was watching Lily. Lily was watching James. Severus was watching an indeterminate point on the floor. Lily delicately ushered Severus into the room, not directly toward James, but not giving him a wide berth either. James looked tense enough to snap in two, but he didn't speak. Lily was poised to spring into action if needed.

Severus gave James a long once-over. Then he said, "I had three galleons on Slytherin losing. I'm glad you didn't botch it up for me."

And then, miraculously, James laughed. Lily melted with relief. Remus did, too. Severus turned away, and the babble of conversation carried on around them. Lily and Severus retreated to a quieter part of the room, away from James' centre of gravity. They settled on an overstuffed armchair. Neither claimed the seat; they each perched on an arm, Lily's feet in the middle while Severus' legs, which looked like they probably didn't bend that way, stretched out to the floor. The two of them looked comfortable together. It warmed Remus to see. He found he couldn't stop glancing over at them. When Lily was obliged to excuse herself for a few minutes, Remus seized his opportunity.

Severus went rigid the moment Lily was out of sight. They had looked sweet sitting on the chair's arms together, but without Lily, the tableau was unbalanced; alone, Severus looked like an overgrown bird preparing to take flight. Remus approached Severus quietly, with the same body language he employed when he wanted to befriend a cat. He proffered a dish of ice cream at arm's length. "Vanilla," he said. "Your favourite, right?"

Severus stared petulantly at the ice cream, not meeting Remus' gaze. Finally, he accepted it. Remus figured that the 'thank you' was implicit, along with a silent 'yes, it is my favourite, well done remembering.'

"Hey," Remus said quietly, drawing closer to Severus. "I'm sorry for the way I lost my temper. I was horrible to you. And I'm so sorry I thought that you —"

"Don't mention it," Severus said.

"Yeah, but, I just wanted to say, I jumped to conclusions, and —"

"I mean it literally. Was that not clear? *Don't mention it.* Ever."

"Yeah. You're right. I shouldn't." Remus smiled lopsidedly. Yet he couldn't stop himself from pressing on. "Only I thought that you were angry with me, because of how I asked you —"

Severus rolled his eyes to the heavens. “Lupin! You are *incorrigible*.”

“Oh, believe me, I know it.” Remus laughed. Until that moment, he never knew that it was possible for someone to scowl around a spoonful of ice cream.

Heavy is the Head Boy

He swayed gently back and forth, the soothing mechanical vibration humming through his body, comforting him, the way his mother used to drive him around the neighbourhood until he finally fell asleep in the backseat of her car. Rocking and humming, humming... a little child... he saw a little child, clinging to him, crawling over him. His child. Teddy! He was bigger than Remus remembered, bright-eyed and curious, babbling and touching his face with clumsy little hands, crystalline saliva gurgling from his cherubic lips. Brown-eyed — no, grey — now green. Remus reached out to hold him close, and then he saw another green-eyed child, limp with terror on the floor. Remus awoke on the train surrounded by darkness, and his deepest fears were clawing their way up through his oesophagus, and he couldn't stop to think, he had to protect the children.

Protect the children...

He opened his eyes. He was on the train, yes, but it was sunny, and a green-eyed child was standing at the threshold of their carriage, casting a long shadow over him. "I've been sent to fetch the Head Boy," she scowled, "that is, if he's not too preoccupied to join us."

Head Boy? Remus looked blearily over to James. James looked back at him, visibly irritated, and made a prompting gesture. Oh. Oh. Remus reached into his pocket. He felt the raised lettering on the badge. *Head Boy*.

Remus rose on unsteady feet. "Sorry," he said hoarsely. "Didn't sleep well last night." Now he remembered where he was, and when he was. *There's been a mistake*, he had pleaded in his letter. *James should be Head Boy*. It wasn't out of modesty or self-doubt. This was simply wrong. This role did not belong to Remus. Hadn't Remus written to Professor McGonagall, begged her to speak to the faculty, to change their decision? (Hadn't he? He had meant to, certainly.)

“Ready?” Lily asked, her patience obviously wearing thin.

“Yes,” Remus said, following her down the swaying carriage. He reached into his pocket, searching. He was *sure* he had packed a bar of chocolate, but upon reflection, he realised that had only been in the future-dream. Too bad, that. Remus felt painfully self-conscious as he followed Lily’s lead through all their Head Girl and Head Boy duties. Irrationally, he felt like Lily should know exactly what to do, because she’d done all of this before. She just didn’t know it.

Remus hated sitting in the prefects’ carriage. At least he had Lily to talk to, but he couldn’t shake off the way Regulus kept smiling at him. Anyone else would think Regulus was just sucking up to the new Head Boy, but Remus knew the truth. Regulus was sizing Remus up, trying to gauge whether Remus had received the message he’d tried to convey by showing his Dark Mark the previous spring. Gauging whether Remus would take the bait. If Regulus was smart, he would not make any further overtures — it was far too risky for him — but he would make himself friendly and available, in hopes that Remus would come to him as a willing recruit. Remus refused to give him an inch. He thought the safest approach was to act as if he hadn’t understood.

Remus couldn’t help studying Regulus, too. He looked different. His face had grown thin, though the Black family bone structure ensured that he looked striking rather than gaunt. Had he only grown out of his baby face, or was he already wasting away under his new master? Remus turned away. He would have to walk a fine line, to act coolly polite toward Regulus, but not cold enough to offend him. Regulus, after all, knew Remus’ secret, and it was only safe as long as Regulus had a secret too. Once Regulus’ allegiance was out in the open... well, Remus did not want to think about that yet.

As they crossed from the station to the school, heavy clouds began to gather over the lake. Remus felt pressure building in his sinuses. There was a thunderstorm approaching. They were rare in that part of the country, but then, the air around Hogwarts often seemed to possess its own temperamental little weather system. Lily was tightly wound all afternoon and evening, and she and Remus couldn’t keep from grating one another. By the time they got to the Start of Term Feast he was feeling so sour he’d nearly lost his appetite. That made him even more irritable, because he *loved* the Start of Term Feast, and this was his last one — well, his last until (if the fates were willing) he would return as a professor. *That* year’s feast had been even more tense and unpleasant than the present one. Which reminded him — Remus looked over to the Slytherin table and waited for Severus to look his way. (It helped that he always sat on the same side of the table, facing the expanse of the Great Hall.) Finally, Remus caught Severus’ eye and smiled. Severus inclined his head. That was reassuring. Remus hadn’t been certain that their tenuous truce would last throughout the summer.

The relief Remus felt on returning to the dorms was overwhelming. He let his travelling clothes drop to the floor without folding them, dove into his cotton pyjamas, and sank into his familiar bed with a contented sigh. After saluting his broken-legged goose, he murmured to no one in particular, “Gosh, I’m glad all that’s over with. I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, sure,” James said from across the room. “Poor you. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and so on.”

Remus sat up, startled by the bitterness in James’ voice. “Sorry,” he said, “have I done something wrong?”

“Apparently not,” James said, crossing his arms. “Apparently, you never do anything wrong. That’s why they made you Head Boy, isn’t it?” Immediately, the room went quiet, as Sirius and Peter both stopped the rummaging they had been doing.

"No one ever said I — hang on, that's what this is about? James, it's not like I asked to be Head Boy. They could just as well have chosen you."

"Yeah," James said, "but they didn't. Funny how that keeps happening, isn't it?"

"What?"

James paused for a breath, feigning calm. "How was the rest of your journey, by the way? Did you and Lily have a nice time out on the lake?"

Ah. Of course. Lily. "Out on the lake? D'you mean helping ferry the first-years over to the school? Yeah, it was lovely. I had a child crying into my sleeve the whole time because he's afraid of boats. Then he got a nosebleed, so now I have a nice child-bloodstain as a souvenir. Very romantic."

That was the wrong thing to say. "That's all right, I'm sure you'll find time to sneak up to the girls' dorm soon," James snapped.

"I don't *sneak*," Remus protested.

"Well, whatever it is you do, you seem to spend an awful lot of time in there."

"Yes. Talking. To my friends. Or am I not allowed to have those, outside of this room?"

"Talking. Yeah. I've seen you on the Map, you know. I've seen your name *awfully* close to Lily's."

"Jesus, James! And you've been, what, *monitoring* us? Do you realise how insecure you sound?" Sudden anger flared within him, scorching.

"No, Remus, I don't *monitor* you, but I can't help getting curious when you disappear for hours on end..."

"Well, just because *you've* never managed to keep a conversation going that long... say, maybe if you tried being more interesting, they'd invite you up too!" That was shabby of Remus and he knew it, but the words spilled forth faster than he could think.

"Is that so?" James' flush was approaching maroon. "Well, if I'm too *boring* for you, just wait and see how much *fun* you'll have on the full moon without me!"

"James — "

"Maybe your *new* friends can become animagi, too! I'm sure it'll be like child's play for them, seeing as they're so much more clever than we are. In fact, why don't you go on and haul your bed upstairs and move in now? Or better yet, you can just share with Lily!"

"James, I don't know how many times I have to tell you before it gets through your thick skull! There's nothing going on between Lily and I!"

"HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE? SHE'S THE SMARTEST, BRAVEST, PRETTIEST GIRL IN SCHOOL!" James shouted.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE SHOUTING AT ME," Remus shouted back. "Do you *want* me to be in love with your girlfriend?"

"NO! OF COURSE NOT!"

“Oh my God. You do! You want me to be jealous of you! You can’t *stand* that I’m not! Not about quidditch, or school, or Lily, or anything!”

“No, you’re not,” James sneered. “You’re not at *all* jealous that I have a girlfriend and you don’t, are you? You sure you’re not *bent* or something?”

Oh.

Remus swallowed hard. This was not at all how he wanted this conversation to go. Then again, he hadn’t exactly come out gracefully the first time around, blind drunk and weeping hysterically into Prongs’ pelt the night of his (literal) stag do after a terrible one-night stand with one of his father’s Ministry colleagues. (Remus never knew if James had told anyone — never even knew if James remembered Remus’ sloppy confession — until years later, when he sat across the table from Sirius in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, alone with him for the first time since Azkaban, and Sirius had broken the tension by asking, “So, what have you been up to all these years? Seen any good films? Been on holiday? Got a girlfriend? Boyfriend? Cat? Dog? You’d better not have a dog,” and Remus had laughed and cried at the same time, because even after all he’d been through, Sirius was still trying to put *him* at ease...)

...He’d waited too long. In hesitating, he’d given his answer. “Are you?” James asked, his voice suddenly very small. Remus nodded in the affirmative.

Remus wasn’t quite sure what to expect next, but he wasn’t prepared to watch James break down in a deluge of tears. “Oh, my *God*. I’m so sorry,” he choked out. “I don’t even know why I said that. I should never have said it.”

“Said what?” Remus asked, disoriented by the turn their argument had taken.

“Said — you know, said it like that, in *that* tone of voice. Like it was an insult. I wanted to hurt you. Fuck me,” James sobbed, “I’m no better than those shitty little would-be Death Eaters who go around calling people *mudbloods* just so they can feel superior.”

“That’s not true,” Remus said gently. “There’s a big difference. The difference is that you already feel rotten about it, and you’re going to remember how this feels and never do it again. And I accept your apology.”

Already, Remus felt ashamed for allowing himself to lose his temper. James was a teenager. He was volatile; he didn’t know what to do with his emotions. Remus ought to have deescalated. He *knew* better. (Didn’t he?) For the first time since the argument had broken out, Remus hazarded a glance at their other friends. Peter had the stricken look of a child watching his parents fight. Sirius was perfectly still, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring down at his clasped hands. Remus waited a few minutes until James had settled down, and then said, “Go ahead. Whatever questions you’re thinking of, just ask me now. I don’t mind.”

Remus was certain that were he not already deeply mottled with red, James would have blushed. He looked remarkably like Harry in that moment. “How long have you...?”

“How long have I known?” Remus mulled this over. At least a quarter-century, now, but he couldn’t tell them that. “A few years, I guess. It wasn’t like a switch flipped — sorry, muggle expression — it’s not like I just woke up one day and understood it all at once.”

“A few *years*? Remus, why didn’t you ever say something?” James asked.

That was a more challenging question to answer. Remus chose to evade it with a little light teasing

instead. “Why didn’t *you*? How’d it take you six months to realise I’m a werewolf, but six years to figure out that I fancy men?”

“Because people actually talk about werewolves, so we had something to go off,” Sirius piped up. “I guess *werewolves* aren’t as threatening.” Remus laughed — rather bitterly and probably harder than the quip deserved — out of sheer relief.

“Aye,” Remus said, “well, can you blame them? People fear being bitten by a werewolf, but they’re afraid of being bitten by a gay person and *liking* it. And what’s worse,” he lowered his voice theatrically, “they could be anywhere. I’ve even heard that they can look *just like anyone else*.”

James snorted. “I suppose that makes *you* the most dangerous man in Britain.”

Remus grinned. “That’s a lot to live up to, but I solemnly swear I shall do my best,” he vowed.

“I’m confused,” Sirius said, finally looking up from his twiddling thumbs. “Sorry, Moony, I’m not trying to be dense, but you’ve *said* you like women. We’ve talked about it.”

“Yes,” Remus said, “I do. I wasn’t lying. I just also like men, too.”

“Oh,” Sirius responded. There was another pregnant pause. “Hang on. Was that an option this whole time? Are you telling me I could have been out there getting *twice* as many dates?”

“Twice zero is still zero, mate,” said James, wiping the last bit of snot from his face.

“Fuck right off, Prongs.” Sirius lobbed a pillow at James’ head.

And just like that, they were all laughing again. Remus leaned back heavily on his bed. He looked about him with wonder; looked within himself, at the marvellous new confidence he seemed to possess. His friends were loyal. His friends were *good*. In that moment it felt like nothing in the world could come between them, nothing in the world could spoil —

“What’s a Death Eater?” Peter asked quietly. It was the first time he had spoken up since they’d returned from the feast.

“Hmm?” James turned to him, as if just remembering that he was in the room.

“What’s a Death Eater?” Peter repeated. “You said it earlier. What does it mean?”

They were all silent for a moment. James and Remus exchanged uneasy glances. Then Sirius exploded. “Christ, Wormtail, read a fucking newspaper!” he shouted, launching to his feet and storming out of the dormitory. Never mind that he was in his pyjamas, and had nowhere else to go.

Remus thought of Regulus smiling wanly at him on the train. It hurt, knowing the reason for Sirius’ outburst, and being unable to comfort him because he wasn’t *supposed* to know yet.

James sat down next to Peter. The storm of emotions had passed from his face; now that the scene was no longer about him, he was all gentle compassion. “It’s all right,” James said. “You didn’t know. Peter, have you heard about — well — you’ve heard about that creep who calls himself Lord Voldemort, right?”

“The dark wizard?” Peter nodded hesitantly. “Yeah. I heard my mum talking about him this summer, but she always stopped whenever she realised I was listening.”

"That's the one. Well, they say he's building a following. Like — like a cult, or something. They've been in the news more and more lately. They've even got a name for themselves, now."

"Death Eaters," Peter concluded. "Oh. I feel like such an idiot."

"You're not," James said soothingly. He rubbed circles on Peter's back. Peter let out a deep, shaky breath. His face was pink with embarrassment.

"We've all got to stay on guard," Remus said softly. "They've been ramping up their attacks in the past few months. They go after anyone they consider 'blood traitors.' Then, of course, there are the muggles, muggleborns, half-bloods..."

Peter's eyes widened. "What, you mean like us?" he asked Remus.

"Like us," Remus confirmed.

"Like all four of us," James added. "If Sirius and I aren't 'blood traitors,' I don't know who fits the bill."

"And Lily..." Peter began. James' hand stilled on his back. "Oh, Prongs, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"No, you're right," said James. "Exactly like Lily. That's why we've all got to look out for one another. Protect each other."

"That's right," Remus agreed. His heart was too sore to say anything else. He wished more than anything that he could just forget, again.

Later that night, after Sirius had slunk back into bed and Peter was gently snoring, Remus sat up with James. He tried at first to lie on his back, as he had for so many of their juvenile heart-to-hearts, but discovered that they were too big to fit on the bed side-by-side. When had that happened?

"I'm sorry for what I said," Remus whispered. "You're not boring. I could talk to you forever and never get bored." It was true.

"Wish you wouldn't. Who says *you're* not the boring one?" James smiled.

"Oh, I'm *definitely* the boring one," Remus agreed.

"That's why you're Head Boy and I'm not. About that... I'm sorry. You deserve it. You've earned it. I just got jealous. It was stupid."

"Jealous? I had no idea," Remus teased. Then he grew serious again. "The thing is, James, I don't deserve it. I don't understand why people keep mistaking me for responsible. I'm not. I was a rubbish prefect. I docked more points from myself than anyone else. I've broken nearly as many rules as you and Sirius have, and not always in your company; I should have racked up a lot more detentions, but somehow I just keep getting away with things. I'm late all the time. I can't stop swearing around children. Sometimes I'm really, really not nice to people. Oh, and have I mentioned I'm a werewolf, too?"

"...Are you done?" James asked, when Remus stopped flagellating himself.

"Only for the moment," Remus said.

“Good. Remus, you’re a decent fellow and people like you. I know you think they shouldn’t, for whatever reason, but they do, and you don’t get any say in it. And you’re very responsible. Too responsible, if you ask me. You might have a stronger conscience than anyone I know. It’s just that you’re wise enough to know that stupid rules deserve to be broken.” Remus snorted softly.

“I’m really not a good person, James. You have no idea.”

“See, there’s that troublesome conscience I was talking about.” James shrugged. “As long as you’re not a bloody Death Eater, there’s always room for improvement.” They were both silent for a moment. Then James whispered, “Hey, Moony. I said something horrible earlier, and I’m sorry for it. I will *never* abandon you on the full moon, no matter how angry at each other we are. And... I want you to know, that goes for after graduation, too. So don’t worry about what happens when we leave school, all right? I’ll come find you, every month. We’ll run together. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” Remus said. And yet he did promise, and Remus knew James would keep that promise. James *had* kept that promise. Every full moon after graduation, as long as it was safe, until the day... Remus felt the corners of his eyes begin to burn. “But thank you, anyway.”

“Moony,” James whispered. His lids were beginning to flutter, heavy with sleep. “One more thing. Don’t you *dare* try to dock points from yourself over any of this.”

Remus chuckled in spite of his tears. “God, Prongs. You really have got my number, haven’t you?”

Dark Marked

"Lily and I are getting married."

Remus nearly choked on the lager he had decided to sip at just the wrong moment. His heart swelled with joy. "James! That's wonderful! Congratulations."

"Yeah. It is," James said warmly. "So, wedding's in December. Christmas Eve. I hope you can make it."

Remus nearly choked again. Damn it. He pushed his glass just out of reach. "Of this year?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, of this year." James sounded amused.

"As in, two months from now? Are you having me on?"

"Don't see the point in joking about this. What would be the punchline?"

"Fair." Remus was truly surprised. They were barely out of school, and both Lily and James were still living with their families. Marriage seemed unimaginably distant and grown-up. James might as well have announced that he was moving to Antarctica. "Christmas Eve, eh? Are you going to be the one to break the news to my mother?" He was trying to be lighthearted.

"Your mum and dad are invited too," James said quickly. "It's going to be pretty small, but you know how parents are. They want to do everything properly. Lily's family are hosting the reception. That should be fun, trying to keep Sirius from using magic in front of the muggles when he's three sheets to the wind." James smirked as he said this. Then he looked down at his hands, fidgeting and tapping arrhythmically on the table. "Listen, Remus. I've asked Sirius to be my best man, but I'd really like it — that is, it would mean a lot to me if you would be..."

"Second-best man?" Remus suggested, chuckling at his friend's embarrassment.

"Sure. Well, really you'll be one half of my second-best, along with Wormtail, of course." James seemed relieved that Remus was laughing.

"Wow. Prongs. What an honour. I'm truly touched to know you think of me as your second-best half-friend."

"Half second-best friend," James corrected. "There's a difference." Then his expression grew sober again. "I'm only joking, though. You know I don't mean anything by it, right? It's just that Sirius and I..."

"I know," Remus interrupted, sparing him. He tapped James' hand lightly, just for a second. Neither of them were much for physical affection, these days. "And I'm being sincere now. It really is an honour."

"I wouldn't want to do it without you there. Without all three of you."

"Of course." But he had to say something, even if James wasn't going to like it. "Just... don't take

this the wrong way, please, but why the rush? We're only eighteen."

"Yeah." James shrugged. "I know. It's a bit weird. I never thought it would happen so quickly. I always imagined we'd give it a few years, live together for a while, see how things go. But then Lily pointed out we'll get a tax break if we go ahead and do it before the end of the year."

Remus snorted. "She's a hopeless romantic, that Lily Evans."

"And I wouldn't change her for the world. You'd better get used to saying Lily Potter, by the way." A grin broke out on James' face.

"Really? She's taking your name?"

"I know. I didn't insist or anything. She thinks it will make things easier for her. She'll be transferring from the muggle tax roll to the Ministry's, you know, and applying for all kinds of documentation. It'll be simpler if we have the same surname. I asked her if she was sure, I told her it doesn't matter to me, but she just said that we live in a patriarchal society, and we might not like it, but it's more pragmatic to play along."

"Ah. Well. That sounds more like Lily." Remus awkwardly stretched to retrieve his pint glass. He thought it was probably safe to resume drinking, now.

"And then... well, you know. Having a pureblood name... it's not that either of us care about that, but..."

Remus held up his hand. "Understood. James, are you sure you're all right with this? Not about getting married, of course, but about doing it on such short notice? I always pictured you going for a big white wedding, and all that."

"Yes. I'm sure," James said firmly. He took a sip of his cider. "You're not wrong, exactly. I used to daydream about getting married at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall. Or maybe outside by the lake. But Lily and I have discussed it a lot, and we both agree. With the way things are right now, it's better to make it official, and sooner rather than later. That way we'll have some legal protections in place if one of us..." He trailed off.

Don't say it, Remus thought. I don't want to hear you say it out loud.

Remus was aghast, at the time. It seemed impossible that his young, funny, radiant friends, fresh from graduation, could already be planning for such grim eventualities. How could they bear to be so practical at a time like this? And how could they be so happy, so hopeful, knowing that their blessed union was underpinned by such a macabre logic?

Later, Remus had come to understand.

Remus didn't like Hallowe'en very much. Not anymore; not since 1981. And yet here were James and Lily and Sirius and Peter, cheerfully anticipating the last Hallowe'en Feast of their Hogwarts careers, blissfully unaware of what lay ahead.

Remus had filled up on sweets early in the day, trying to distract himself from his grief, and he was happy to have an array of relatively healthy foods laid out before him at dinner. Rich pumpkin soup

with cream, and pumpkin tartlets, and miniature pumpkins stuffed with rice and more pumpkin... it was fortunate that Remus liked pumpkin. He noted that this feast featured several more vegetarian dishes than the average Hogwarts meal. Remus just hoped that Severus liked pumpkin, too.

The first sign that something was wrong came just as pudding was served. The professors at the head table were leaning close, whispering amongst themselves. Professor Flitwick rose from his chair and, projecting as much calm as possible, approached the Ravenclaw table. A seventh-year student rose and followed him out of the Great Hall. Remus recognised him as the boy who had covered the entrance to Ravenclaw Tower at the party they'd gone to back in fifth year. What an absurd thing to remember in that moment. A ripple of whispers spread across the room.

Then the first *Evening Prophet* arrived, carried by little Perdrix and delivered into the hands of Regulus Black. Regulus' expression disclosed nothing at all as he scanned the page. Remus looked to the head table again. He read the concern in Minerva's eyes. She was likely wishing they had been able to intercept the owls until a more appropriate time; but the damage was done. Dumbledore was no longer at the table. When had he gone?

More and more owls arrived. Finally, James received his copy. Everyone crowded around him to see. Even upside-down from across the table, Remus recognised the image on the front page. It was an enormous and grotesque death's head looming in the sky above a row of semi-detached council houses. Remus automatically looked toward the Slytherin table. Regulus was watching Sirius, who was seated beside Remus. Then Regulus caught Remus' eye. Remus looked back down.

"They say it's his symbol. They put it up over a house after they've..."

"...but as far as anyone knows, he never did anything against You-Know-Who. All he did was marry into a muggle family..."

"...and they say it's not the first time this has happened. It's just the first time it's leaked to the press before they could obliviate everyone."

Yes, Remus remembered this night — though having long forgotten *when* the news had broken, he'd been caught by surprise. It was deeply sobering. While Remus was in his isolated little world, worrying about the changes he had made to his friends' lives and his own, the world outside the Hogwarts grounds continued on like clockwork. Right on schedule. Yet Remus knew that eventually the repercussions of the changes he had made would extend to the wider world, too. And what then? He couldn't stay safely tucked away at school forever.

The atmosphere was tense and sombre as the students made their way back to their dorms. Sirius seemed especially unnerved. The moment they were safely behind the closed door of their dormitory, he began pacing, growing increasingly discomposed with every pivot. "I can't stand it," he finally blurted after several minutes, as if he were finishing a sentence he'd begun in his head.

"Yeah," James agreed. He didn't need to ask what Sirius meant.

"And that little bastard just sat there calmly the whole time. Didn't even pretend to act surprised at the news."

"Who?" James asked, because it wasn't immediately clear which little bastard Sirius was referring to.

"Snivellus. That creep was staring at you all through dinner, you know," Sirius said, turning on Remus.

“Was he? I suppose you’d only know that if you were staring at *him*,” Remus pointed out.

“Well, it was kind of hard to ignore. I was trying to figure out which one of us he was gawking at. Thought it was Prongs, at first, but no. It was you.”

Remus shrugged. “He can look at me if he wants. I don’t care.” Remus had been watching, too. If he could have drawn a string along every sightline that passed between the Slytherin and Gryffindor tables that night, it would have formed a veritable Cat’s Cradle. Sirius staring at Severus; Severus staring at Remus; Remus staring at Regulus; Regulus, as usual, staring at Sirius. What did it matter, anyway, if none of them were willing to speak to one another? Staring communicated nothing, though it aggravated a great deal.

“I don’t like it. I think he’s plotting something. Moony, I’m just looking out for you. I’m worried.”

“Severus isn’t *plotting* against me, Sirius. We actually get on quite well, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed,” Sirius scowled. “Has it occurred to you he might be plying you for information?”

Yes, that idea had indeed occurred to Remus. In fact, he had shouted it in Severus’ face last May in the Potions classroom. “I *really* don’t think that’s the case,” he said. “And even if it were, I’m not sure what kind of information he’ll have gleaned from watching me burn my tongue on the soup.”

“Have you forgotten the way he used to follow us around? Poking his big nose where it didn’t belong, always asking questions about us?”

“*Used to* being the operative term, Padfoot. Same as you *used to* hex him any time you were in the same room. Then you grew up and realised that’s not how you treat another person.”

“He started it,” Sirius blurted reflexively. “And I’ll do it again if he ever comes after you.”

“If he were going to ‘come after me,’ don’t you think he would have tried it already?”

“Not if he’s waiting for the right moment. Not if he’s gathering evidence. Not if it’s more useful for him to sit on the information that you’re a — ”

“Sirius, will you *stop*?” James interrupted. “I’m so sick of this. Snape really isn’t as bad as you think.”

Sirius looked dumbstruck. “You too, Prongs? Am I losing my mind? He’s a fucking *Death Eater*. Did I miss the meeting where we decided we’re all okay with that?”

“He’s *not*,” James argued. “Look, he’s Lily’s best friend. Do you really think Lily would be friends with a Death Eater?”

“And all those curses he’s been hurling at us since we were eleven? I suppose that was all just good clean fun? You’ve said it yourself, James. Snape knows *far* too much dark magic to be innocent. It isn’t normal.”

“Lily says he wants to be a Defence specialist...” For the first time, there was doubt in James’ voice. Sirius seized on it and pounced.

“Oh, well, if *Lily* says it, it must be true,” Sirius spat. “God, James, how whipped are you? Can’t you even think for yourself anymore?”

A crack, and a deafening silence. James stood panting in the middle of the room. Slowly, stunned,

Sirius raised a hand to his swelling jaw. “You *punched* me,” he said disbelievingly.

“Yeah,” James said, looking just as shocked himself.

“Oh, God,” Sirius groaned. A trickle of blood escaped his mouth.

For once, it was Peter who sprang into action. “Let’s get you to the infirmary,” he said, using the no-nonsense voice that (Remus assumed) he usually reserved for his little step-siblings. Incredibly, Sirius responded to it, and allowed Peter to march him out of the dorm.

James was trembling, his back turned to Remus. “He can’t talk about Lily like that,” he said, seemingly for his own benefit more than anything else. “I won’t let him.”

“I know,” Remus said soothingly. “It was a nasty thing to say.” Privately, Remus thought he might’ve struck Sirius himself if James hadn’t gotten there first. Remus guided James to sit down.

“If I didn’t know him like I do, I might not forgive him,” James said miserably.

“Even knowing him, there’s no excuse for what he said just now.”

“No, there’s not. But I know it’s not actually about Lily. It’s not even about Snape, really...”

“No,” Remus said quietly, finishing James’ thought. “It’s about Regulus. Isn’t it?”

James looked up sharply. “You know?”

“I’ve pieced enough together,” Remus replied.

“We’re all worried about the war. None of us likes the way things are headed. I hate being stuck at school when people are *dying* out there. I hate it. Just, for Sirius, it’s... he takes it really personally, you know?” Remus hummed in agreement. “But I won’t let him take it out on Lily. She’s more in danger than any of us...” James choked on the end of his sentence.

“She’s braver and stronger than any of us, too,” Remus said. Of that, he was confident. James nodded.

“It’s really sick,” James said, “the things those people do. Did you know, Sirius said they’ve been cultivating Regulus since he was *fourteen*? Some of the older Slytherins, whose families are followers of... I mean, fourteen! He was only a kid!”

“He still is,” Remus said.

James nodded again. “Sirius is pretty certain he’s already got the Mark. Have you heard about how they do that?”

“Yes.”

“It’s fucking sick,” James said again. “*Branding* people. I can’t wait until I can get out of here and actually *fight* them.” He swallowed heavily. “Lily says... Lily says we can fight them from in here, too. Try to keep them from recruiting more students, the way they did with Regulus. She really believes it’s possible. Sirius thinks it’s a lost cause.”

“And what do you think?” Remus asked delicately.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m... somewhere in between. I want to be as hopeful as Lily is. Lily says that if we can keep even one person from joining up with Voldemort, then we’ll have done

something to help. I like that idea. I wish I could do something *bigger* than that, but I think she's right. She's not being naïve, you know. She's being practical."

"She's worried about Severus," Remus concluded, before he could stop himself.

"Well... yeah. She is. They've been friends since they were little kids, did you know that? I mean, before Hogwarts even. I never knew."

"Oh." Remus hadn't known that, either. Somehow, he felt like he should have.

"It's dangerous in Slytherin. I mean, he hangs around the same lowlifes that recruited Regulus. He shares a dorm with them. Lily's worried he's susceptible."

"Susceptible... but she doesn't think he's gone over to their side?" The word *yet* hung in the air between them.

James shrugged. "No, she doesn't think so. For a while there — this was before Lily and I were friends — for a while, she was really worried about, you know, about the *company* he was keeping. She said they used to fight about it all the time. But it's gotten a lot better now."

"I'm glad. Why do you think that is?" Remus honestly wanted to know. The first time around, Lily and Severus hadn't even been on speaking terms after fifth year — but things were different this time. Everything was different.

James' mouth tightened into an expression Remus couldn't identify. "Well, I don't know if I should say this, but... Lily seems to think it has something to do with you."

Remus' heart skipped a beat. There was more truth in that than his friends could even imagine. Indirectly, it had *everything* to do with him. He had sparked the entire chain of events that had lead them to this point. That obviously was not what Lily meant, though. As to that, Remus was baffled. "What could it possibly have to do with me?" he asked.

"Well, you know, since you started talking to him — I don't know, maybe it was when you did that Potions project together back in fifth year — Lily said that was around the time things started to change. Not all at once, but little by little, they stopped arguing as much. She said he used to be desperate to get in with Mulciber and his little gang of inbreds, but he hardly ever mentions them anymore. At first, Lily thought Snape just stopped bringing it up around her because he knew it upset her, but she doesn't think so anymore. She really believes he's changed his mind about them. About all of it. And I've watched him, you know, since Lily told me more about him. She's right. The other Slytherins — they don't even give him the time of day. Not in public, anyway."

"I'm happy that Lily and Severus are friends again. I still don't understand where I come in," Remus said. He was telling the truth. He recalled Lily saying something similar at the quidditch match last spring; it had confused him then, and it confused him now. "I really don't know Severus as well as she seems to think. We've never talked about *anything* to do with Voldemort, or the Death Eaters, or even Dark magic. I'd love to take credit for helping him change his mind, but I had nothing to do with it."

"I don't think that's what Lily means," James explained. "It's not so much *what* you two talk about — whatever the hell that might be. It's more the fact that you talk at all. Remus, you're sort of like... a bellwether, a sign of change. Before, Lily was Snape's only friend outside of Slytherin. Maybe his only friend at all. She was sort of the exception to the rule, because they'd known each other so long. But then when she saw the two of you getting along, you know, having a laugh together, she realised that her friendship with him wasn't just a fluke. That Snape actually *wants* to

be around people who aren't, well, aspiring Death Eaters."

"Ah. So it's less about good or bad influences, and more about having a multiplicity of influences."

James looked puzzled, but said, "Yeah. Something like that, I suppose. And the more, the better." He looked up into Remus' eyes. "Look, I still don't really get what you and Lily see in him, but you're probably the two most sensible people I know. I trust your judgment."

Remus was flattered, but felt that James' faith in him was completely misplaced. Remus' judgment had led him astray many, many times. James must have read the discomfort in his face and interpreted it in his own way, because he asked Remus, "I'm not completely off the mark, am I? You *do* actually like Snape, right?"

"I don't dislike him," Remus said, echoing the words he had spoken to Harry years before. They were quiet for a minute. Remus felt his treacherous circulatory system building heat and knew that his face had gone red.

"Oh my God," James exclaimed abruptly, eyes going wide. "You don't — y'know — *like* him, do you?"

"No! There's nothing like that going on," Remus said quickly, which was conveniently not the same as saying *no, I don't like him*. It was the honest truth. Whatever was *going on* in Remus' disordered mind was completely one-sided. Impressed as he was with James' broad-mindedness, Remus still wasn't quite ready to confess that he had been roundly rejected by Severus Snape. And if Sirius ever found out, heaven forbid...

"Right. Just wanted to check. Erm, not that — I mean, if you did — if you were — well, what I'm trying to say is, that would still be all right. All right?"

"All right," Remus said, smiling in spite of himself. "Thanks, Prongs. That means a lot to me."

"Yeah, well, you're my friend. Whoever you want to date is fine by me."

"Ah. I see." Remus gave James a quick pat on the shoulder. "Sirius will come round, you know. I think he's just... not quite used to the idea of Lily yet, is all. You know how he likes to be the centre of attention."

James chuckled, but he looked glum. "I hope so. I hate this, Moony. If I ever have to choose between Lily and Sirius..."

"You won't," Remus said firmly. That was one thing he could say about the future with absolute certainty. "Sirius likes Lily, and once he pulls his head out of his own arse he's going to see how good she is for you. And in any case, they would never make you choose. They both love you too much." James flushed scarlet, and Remus realised a moment too late what he had said. "Erm, that is, I mean..."

"I know what you meant," James said. "Look, it's getting late, and I think I'd prefer to be in bed by the time Sirius and Peter get back. Good talk, though."

"Mhmm. 'Night, Prongs."

"Good night," James yawned, drawing the curtains around himself.

Remus returned to his own bed, but he wasn't ready to sleep. His thoughts were swirling. *James*

Potter had just punched Sirius in the face and given his blessing for Remus to date Severus Snape. The course of events had spun wildly beyond Remus' control or comprehension. He could no longer follow all the moving pieces.

Of course, it all traced back to the Incident, back in fifth year. No Incident meant no near-death experience, no precarious secret hanging in the balance between the five of them. But it wasn't just that, was it? No Incident meant that James and Severus had not spent a semester as potions partners; no months of pent-up irritation and rivalry ready to explode at a moment's notice. And that day at the lake... well, who could say what might have happened if Remus hadn't panicked and triggered an actual manifestation of his emotional storm? That meant there had been no falling out with Lily, which gave Lily and Severus time to repair their relationship... and somehow, all of these variables added up to a truce between James Potter and Severus Snape. It was a wonder.

Remus was still lying awake, pondering, when Sirius slipped back into the dorm. Seeing that Remus' bed curtains were open, Sirius came and sat down on the edge of his mattress. "Hey," he whispered.

"Hey. What happened to Peter?" Remus whispered back.

"He didn't come back here?" Sirius shrugged. "I don't know. Probably out romping through the kitchen pantries. Is James still angry with me?"

"Yes," Remus said, "but he's worried, too. You know that what you said was unacceptable, right?"

"I know," Sirius said glumly.

"You'll need to apologise first thing in the morning."

"I *know*," Sirius sighed heavily.

"And apologise to Lily, too."

"Why?" Sirius asked, a note of petulance creeping into his voice. "She didn't even hear what I said."

Remus rolled away onto his other side. "All right, well, I tried. Good night, Sirius."

"No, wait. It's just..." Sirius scratched his head in frustration, mussing up his hair. "What am I supposed to say? 'Hey Lily, sorry I've been a jerk for six years, but I'm done with all that, can we be friends now?'"

"Well, it's worth a shot," Remus said. "Sometimes the direct approach is best. Or at least most Gryffindor-like." Besides, it had worked for Sirius the first time around. Remus saw no reason it shouldn't work again.

"If you say so. I'll give it a try." Sirius paused. "Say, is that what you said to Sni — Snape, to get him to stop hexing you?" he added, in a valiant attempt to be light and teasing.

"Something along those lines," Remus said. It had been more like two decades by the time he'd screwed up the courage to apologise, but the principle still stood.

"And did it work?"

"I'm still not sure yet," Remus replied.

“All right. Fine. Just... be careful, will you, Remus?”

Remus remembered the night, more than a year past now, when he had sat on the edge of Sirius' bed and had the same conversation in reverse. He couldn't help but smile. He shifted so that he could look Sirius in the eye, though his face was hard to make out in the dark. “I will if you will,” he whispered.

The sands o' life shall run

24 December, 1977

R. J. Lupin

Gryffindor House

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Secluded Enclave, Awfully Far North, Scotland

Dear Dad and Mum,

I hope you are having a lovely time in Paris. I know that you are there for work and did not want to travel over Christmas, but I hope you will still take some time to enjoy yourselves. You deserve a holiday. I'm only sorry you did not get sent somewhere warmer. Please have some roasted chestnuts and vin chaud for me while you are there. I miss you very much, but I am having a nice time here at Hogwarts, so please don't worry about me. It's for the best anyway, because I have developed a dreadful cough. (This was one of their numerous codewords for the full moon.)

I have tried to heed your advice and not spend too much time revising, but you know how it is for N.E.W.T. students. (Mum, don't try to pretend you don't understand. I know how many A-levels you took.) There are a few other students from my year staying over the holiday, so I have plenty of company. But it is also nice to have the whole dorm room to myself! Have I ever told you that James, Sirius, and Peter all snore? Sometimes it's like listening to an out-of-tune kazoo choir.

That reminds me, the funniest thing happened the other night. Do you remember when I told you about Peppermint, the cat I'm trying to steal from one of the fifth-years? She has figured out how to get into our dorm on her own (the cat, not the fifth-year) and now she likes to come sleep on my pillow or sit in the window by my bed while I read. Well, the night before everyone left for winter hols, she decided to try sleeping under Sirius' duvet. Sirius didn't notice the lump on his bed and almost sat right on top of her, which caused her to give him a well-deserved scratch right across his (forgive my crudeness) bottom. He didn't know what happened at first and was yelling that his

bed had bitten him. We all had a great laugh at his expense. (Remus left out the part where Sirius had tried to scare little Peppermint off by becoming a dog, but ended up backed into a corner whimpering while she hissed and spat at him.)

I am looking forward especially to New Year's Eve. I am going to try to convince Professor McGonagall to dance with me. Her virtuosity is legendary. Wish me luck, I shall need it. I also promise to have a lie-in on New Year's Day, no matter how much I want to be good and revise.

Remus stopped and chewed the end of his quill. Thus far, it was just like any letter he might have written home at seventeen. He hesitated only a moment before adding at the bottom,

I love you both very, very, very, very, very much and I am proud that you're my parents. I think about you every day. My only wish this Christmas is for your happiness and good health.

Love,

Remus

P.S. Please send more jaffa cakes and some ovaltine

P.P.S. and maybe a bottle of Fanta if it's not too heavy for the post

There's nothing quite as depressing as waking up in an empty dormitory on Christmas morning.

At least, that's what Remus Lupin, aged seventeen, would have told you. Remus Lupin, aged approximately-forty-five-or-take-a-few, would tell you that in fact, quite a lot of things are more depressing. Having now woken up alone (and not always in a room with solid walls) for the majority of his Christmas mornings, there was nothing especially remarkable about that morning in 1977 at all. And yet, in spite of himself, Remus felt lonely.

He was cheered by the small pile of gifts that had appeared at the foot of his bed. Remus sat on the floor to open them straight away. Across from him, he propped up a photo of little Tonks that Andromeda had included in her Christmas card to Sirius. She was wearing a puffy lace-trimmed dress with an oversized velvet ribbon in her hair, and she had her back turned toward the camera, defiantly refusing to pose for a photo in the hated garments. Every so often, she would look back over her shoulder, her ruddy tear-stained face set in the most withering glare a four-year-old could possibly muster. They had all laughed when it arrived in the post. Remus laughed again, looking at it now. He knew that years later, that photo would still have pride of place on Andromeda and Ted's mantle. It was a family favourite. Ted loved to recount the story to visitors while Tonks rolled her eyes and pretended to act chagrined.

The best gift Remus received that year was a beautiful new set of robes from his parents, which he

knew he would still be wearing in 1993 when he returned to teach at Hogwarts. "I'll try to take better care of you this time," he whispered into the soft wool as he stroked it with his thumb. Remus left the gift wrappings scattered about the floor as he prepared to face the day; the mess made him feel more festive. Breakfast in the Great Hall was pleasant but awkward, as usual, and by the end of it Remus no longer felt lonely. In fact, he felt as if he'd had his fill of smalltalk for the day. He decided to skip lunch and instead snuck into the kitchens for a midday snack.

While he was in the kitchens, Remus dropped off the bundle of New Year cards that he had spent the previous few days making for all of the house elves. He knew that house elves didn't traditionally celebrate Christmas, but they were wild about New Year's Day. Even so, Remus figured that it wouldn't hurt to drop their cards off a week early. Especially as it would give him an opportunity to sample the Christmas pudding they had prepared for the evening feast. He sat and visited for half an hour before he was shooed out for being a distraction.

On his way out of the kitchens, he ran into Severus emerging from the dungeons. "Hello!" Remus greeted him brightly. "Happy Christmas. I didn't see you at breakfast this morning."

"I wasn't hungry," Severus said.

"You look like you want to go sit in the Great Hall about as much as I do. I was just on my way out to get some air. I packed lunch. Want to come with? There's enough for two."

Severus only shrugged, but he followed along. They strolled out into the courtyard. The persistent rain had let up, but everything was still damp. "It's almost the right weather for a rainbow," Remus remarked hopefully.

"Not enough sun," Severus said.

"Ah, well. I couldn't tell how rotten the weather was going to be from the Great Hall this morning. The ceiling always looks like it's snowing on Christmas."

"I couldn't tell the weather from the Slytherin dorms, either," Severus said, "although the perch seemed very lively this morning." Remus laughed.

Remus cast a drying charm on a bench in the cloisters. As they settled in, he pulled a steaming cloth out of his pocket and unwrapped it. Severus frowned. "I thought you said you packed lunch," he said.

"I did. It's Christmas. Mince pies count as lunch on Christmas." Severus looked disdainful, but he didn't refuse one. After finishing his first mince pie, Remus added, "Oh! I nearly forgot." He pulled a small flask out of his other pocket and screwed the top off. A sweet aroma of cinnamon, orange and clove rose from within.

"You carry mulled wine in a flask?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Yes. Oh, it holds a lot more than it looks like. I just got it this morning. It was a gift from... erm, from Sirius." Remus cringed slightly.

"You can say his name around me, you know. He's not the bloody Dark Lord."

Remus laughed in surprise. "All right. Sorry."

Severus clucked his tongue. "Remus Lupin, day drinking in plain view of students and staff?"

"Go and tell the Head Boy, if you like." Remus fished in his pockets for a moment, then pulled out

an old foil wrapper he'd forgotten to throw away. He transfigured it into a festive wine glass with a twisted red and green stem, filled it, and handed it to Severus.

"Elegant," Severus admitted grudgingly.

Remus beamed. "Thanks. I'm not half bad at Transfiguration." He took a swig of mulled wine directly from the flask. Severus looked less impressed by that.

"Glass is a finicky material to work with," Severus continued.

"Mmhmm. I know," Remus said.

"Did you ever hear that glass is actually a very slow-moving liquid?"

"I've heard that. That's why all of the old mirrors and stained-glass windows look like they're sagging, isn't it?"

"No. It's not actually true. Just something people came up with to explain why old windows look that way."

"Oh. That's a bit disappointing. Why do they look that way, then?"

"I told you. Glass is finicky."

"Ah. They're not transfigured though, are they?"

"Come on, Lupin. Think. I don't know that there's ever been a witch or wizard powerful enough to transfigure something for a *thousand years*."

"I suppose not. Unless Merlin himself installed all the stained glass windows at Hogwarts. You know, just as a hobby. Or maybe a side job. Being the most famous and powerful wizard of all time doesn't pay as well as you might expect."

Severus actually deigned to smile at his stupid joke, albeit with a dramatic roll of his eyes. Remus' stomach fluttered. He fed it more mulled wine in an attempt to dampen its enthusiasm. They sat in comfortable silence as they polished off the rest of the mince pies.

"Still," Remus said as he rose from the bench, "it's a nice thought."

"What is?" They began to perambulate around the covered walkway.

"Glass, as a liquid — it's a nice metaphor."

"A metaphor for what?" Severus asked.

Remus stopped walking as he tried to articulate the imagery in his head. "It's — I suppose I like the idea that it's always trying to return to its natural state. That even though it looks solid, it's slowly moving all the time. That no matter how humans transform it, shape it, position it, in the end it will always want to become sand again, and flow. I know that doesn't make any sense, scientifically, but I think it's a beautiful idea."

"Like this," Severus said, and cast the wine glass into the middle of the courtyard. As it shattered, the fragments began to curl and shimmer, turning back into aluminium.

"I suppose, like that," Remus said, vanishing the pieces. "And just this once, I'll let you off the hook for littering."

Severus leaned against an archway and looked at Remus contemplatively. Remus was not accustomed to seeing Severus *lean*. He was always upright, always rigid. Now he looked pliant, like molten glass. It was so quiet in the cloisters. Their breath turned to steam as it hit the cool air, and a faint mist rose from the flagstones as the sun showed through the clouds. Somewhere, Remus heard a robin calling.

“Oh,” Remus said softly. “Severus. You’re standing under mistletoe.”

“I know,” Severus said, just as soft.

Remus’ mouth went dry. “You do?” he whispered. He took a step closer, searching Severus’ face. Severus straightened his spine. And then... he reached up, plucked the mistletoe from the keystone above him, and put it in his pocket. Remus blinked rapidly. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

“It’s a useful ingredient,” Severus said matter-of-factly, stepping away from Remus again. “I’m going for a walk. Come along, if you like.”

“Ah,” Remus replied tremulously. “Of course.” He followed after Severus, trying desperately to clear his head of the moment that had just eluded him.

“They appear in the same places every Christmas Day,” Severus explained as they reentered the castle. “I’ve known about them for years.”

“So you go around and harvest them. That’s a fun holiday tradition.” Remus smiled. Once he got over the shock, he had to admit there was something endearing about Severus dispassionately pilfering the décor.

“I went out and got the first one this morning. It grows on the Whomping Willow. Whoever created the mistletoe charm obviously had a sick sense of humour.”

“Gosh. How did you get it down?” Remus asked.

Severus glanced sidelong at Remus. “I’m a wizard, Lupin. I summoned it.”

They arrived at the Potions classroom, where a third sprig of mistletoe hung across the doorway. Sick sense of humour, indeed. Remus was sorely tempted to crack a joke — *what kind of deranged person would try to kiss someone in the Potions room?* — but he felt that would probably be inappropriate.

They made their way back upstairs. The fourth sprig of mistletoe was suspended above the entrance to the staffroom. “Scandalous. D’you think whoever cast the charm was crushing on a professor?”

“Knowing this place, it was probably a professor that cast it.”

“Fair.”

As they started up the next flight of steps, the stairway began to shift, hinging 180 degrees at an agonisingly slow pace. Severus huffed in annoyance and crossed his arms. Lupin leaned against the banister, idly looking down. It was a bit like being on a horizontal ferris wheel. He’d always liked ferris wheels. He was about to make this inane observation out loud, but Snape spoke first.

“What are you doing here, anyway, Lupin? I don’t remember you ever staying over the winter holiday before.”

“No, I’ve usually gone home.” There had been fourth year, of course, when the full moon fell just after Christmas and his parents had been unable to make arrangements for him, but Remus couldn’t blame Severus for not noticing his presence. He had spent nearly the entire holiday holed up in the Gryffindor tower, although he had been able to spend Christmas in Hogsmeade with his family. *(He would never forget the look on his mother’s face when she saw the Shrieking Shack for the first time...)* “My parents are travelling,” Remus continued. “Things just didn’t line up this year, but that’s all right.”

Severus made a small noise of acknowledgment, obviously distracted by his own thoughts. Remus felt a familiar pinching feeling in his bowels; anxiety. Perhaps that was what wrenched his next words out of him, because he certainly hadn’t planned on saying them.

“Actually, they’re not. My mum’s in rehab, but I’m not supposed to know that.” And he hadn’t; not until years later.

“Is she an alcoholic?” Severus asked. He asked this as easily as one might ask what’s for tea, or whether it looked like rain.

“No. Barbiturates.”

“Ah.” Remus examined Severus’ face in profile. There was no judgment, no mockery, and no curiosity either. No change at all; nothing. Remus found the nothingness immensely comforting. The pinch in his stomach loosened a little.

“I haven’t told anyone else,” Remus said. “Most people aren’t very sympathetic. They think... Well, some people can’t accept that this sort of thing happens to nice, friendly, suburban mums.”

“It does where I come from,” Severus said.

Just as he spoke, the stairway settled into place, not far from the entrance to the library. Reluctantly, Severus admitted that the stairway had provided them a helpful shortcut to their next destination, which delighted Remus. Christmas was one of the few days of the year that the library was closed, but Severus easily undid the locks and pried open the door. “You know how to break into the library?” Remus asked in surprise.

“Yes. Don’t you?” Severus replied.

“Well, yes, I do. I just didn’t expect that any reasonable person would take the time to work it out.”

Severus smirked. “It isn’t difficult,” he said. “I don’t think anyone’s too worried about overzealous students trying to break in on a bank holiday.”

“Well, then, they clearly don’t know Severus Snape,” Lupin said.

“Or Remus Lupin,” Severus said, raising his brows. The fifth sprig of mistletoe was just outside the Restricted Section. Severus snagged it hurriedly, then they left the library and repaired the locks.

The sixth sprig of mistletoe was inside the Defence Against The Dark Arts classroom, near the spot where Remus would one day place the cabinet with the boggart in it. “Can’t believe I never noticed that,” Remus mused out loud.

“Why?” Severus gave him an odd look. “Do you often lurk around in classrooms on Christmas Day?”

“No,” Remus said quickly, “but apparently you do.”

Severus stopped once they were back in the corridor. “There’s only one more,” he said. “It’s a longer walk, though. If you’d rather not come along, that’s fine.”

“I’d like the walk,” Remus said. He hoped that wasn’t disappointment that flickered across Severus’ face. Remus certainly didn’t want to linger where he wasn’t wanted. Severus, however, said nothing.

They kept walking, ascending higher and higher until they reached the foot of the final staircase. Severus looked up, then shrugged almost apologetically at Remus. “Cliché, I know,” he said.

They mounted the steps to the platform of the Astronomy Tower. The seventh sprig of mistletoe hung from the centre of the ceilinged portion. Severus summoned it. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go back.”

“Wait,” Remus said. “Just a minute.” By now he was feeling the effects of the mulled wine he and Severus had been sharing. He wandered to the open precipice and rested his elbows on the rampart, taking in the air. It was a bad day for astronomy. The lake and grounds were completely obscured by mist that bled indistinguishably into the clouds. Remus felt as if he were in a little insular world of his own, like being inside a snow globe, only without the snow. He felt sublimely calm. He had a sense of belonging, body and soul, to the world around him; belonging exactly where he was. The drizzle began to accumulate into heavy droplets. Remus tilted his head back, letting the rain soak his face. “So much for a white Christmas,” he murmured.

“Don’t lean so close to the edge,” Severus called out from the covered belvedere. There was a note of panic in his voice.

Remus turned around and took a step toward Severus. When he did, he saw that the mistletoe had rebloomed above Severus’ head. He laughed. He had just realised something wonderful.

“What are you laughing at?” Severus snapped.

Remus, dreamlike, held out two closed fists. “I’ve got something in each hand. Do you want to know what?”

“Excuse me?”

Remus raised his left hand first. “I have a secret,” he said. He unclenched his fist slowly and extended it, the flat of his scarred palm facing upward, as if in offering. “I know who planted the mistletoe around the castle.”

Severus tensed and drew back. “Lupin. Did you and your little *friends* put me up to this?”

“One of us did,” Remus affirmed, smiling. “Don’t you want to know what’s in my other hand?” He took another step forward, crooked his elbow and held up the fist. “It’s my caution,” he said. Then he spread his fingers wide and pantomimed throwing it behind him, off on the wind. “*Whoosh*,” he added for effect.

“Are you touched in the head?” Severus took a few steps back. Try as he might, there was more anxiety than contempt in his voice.

“Why did you bring me up here, Severus?” Remus asked.

“I told you. The mistletoe...”

“...is a useful ingredient, yes. Why did you bring *me* up *here*, Severus?”

Severus blanched. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said faintly.

Remus stepped closer. “You smelled me, didn’t you?” he asked. It wasn’t exactly what he meant to say, but it felt right.

“*What?*”

“That day in the Potions lab, when you made me go stand in the corner... you and I both know the fumes were too powerful for anything else to come through. You smelled *me* in the fumes, didn’t you?” Remus felt a smile growing inexorably across his face.

“I don’t — ”

“It’s all right,” Remus interrupted. “I smelled you, too. Well, in a manner of speaking.”

“You — what?” Severus’ eyes were wide, pupil ringed with dark iris and iris ringed with white, and white sclera ringed with dark lashes against skin that had drained of all colour.

“Mmhhh.” Remus stayed where he was, just beyond the cover of the vaulted ceiling. He had said his part. He looked up at the mistletoe. He and Severus were about equidistant to it, now. He looked back at Severus. They were silent, and yet they were enveloped by noise, heavy rain lashing the stones and whistling wind and thundering hearts.

“Ask me again,” Severus said quietly, so quietly it could almost be a trick of the wind.

Remus tilted his head to one side as he considered Severus. “I thought it was impossible,” he said.

“Even so. Ask me.”

Remus swallowed, forcing the saliva through his mouth and throat. “Okay,” he said hoarsely. “Can I kiss you, Severus?”

Severus nodded and came forward to meet him.

Two long strides, and Remus cupped Severus’ face in his hands and kissed him. It was a shy, quiet kiss, but below the surface Remus’ stomach was doing flips. A driving wind picked up behind Severus, and Remus caught a mouthful of tangled black hair. Remus laughed, and Severus smiled; the tension was broken. Remus shivered as his unclasped robes fluttered behind him, but Severus grasped the hems and pulled them back into place, wrapping the fabric tight around Remus and trapping his hands between their abdomens. Remus brushed the hair from Severus’ face and held it back as they kissed again. It felt warmer the second time. Almost imperceptibly they began to drift until they came to rest against a column. They were parallel to the edge rather than perpendicular, both leaning heavily on their shoulders against the wet stone. Remus needed the support to keep his knees from buckling. Severus’ hands moved from the outside of Remus’ robes to the inside, wrapping around his waist and pulling him close. Remus was surprised. He had expected Severus to be more reticent. Remus slid his hands from Severus’ face, down his shoulders, and then hooked his elbows under Severus’ arms, seeking heat. He placed his hands flat against Severus’ shoulder blades, feeling the heartbeat underneath.

Remus thought it would be sensible to halt things there, but he *really* didn’t want to. He began to kiss Severus along his jawline, working back to the space below his ear, the juncture between head and neck. They were featherlight kisses, no suction or teeth or tongue. Severus dug his chin into Remus’ shoulder and sighed. It was a bit sharp and uncomfortable and so, so gratifying. Remus

felt, rather than heard, a low laugh vibrating through Severus' ribs. "When you told me you wished for a more *amicable* relationship," Severus purred, "I didn't think you meant it like *this*." His hands drew circles across Remus' lower back.

Remus smiled against Severus' neck, giving it a playful graze with his teeth before resuming his kisses. Then he stilled. "When did I say that?" he murmured into Severus' skin.

"Hmm?"

Remus drew back until their noses were an inch apart, searching for eye contact. "When did I say those words to you?" he repeated. The gleeful feeling in his stomach turned into hollow dread. Disbelief.

"I... must have been mistaken," Severus said, refusing to meet his eyes. He tried to kiss Remus again, but Remus leaned away.

"No," Remus said, quavering. "No, I think you know exactly when I said it. We were standing in the courtyard, right where that first sprig of mistletoe was hanging. It was the end of summer, and there was still enough twilight for a stroll after the students went to bed. We hadn't spoken to one another in a long, long time..."

It was hard to say who tore away first, but suddenly they were standing several feet apart as if a small explosion had ejected them from one another. Severus' face contorted into a mask of horror. "You," he said.

"You?" Remus whispered.

"*YOU*." Remus thought he had seen Severus enraged before, but it had been nothing like this. He was shaking from head to foot. "All this time — " No, Remus had never seen Severus so angry that he lost his facility with words, but now he spluttered in a way that would have been incomprehensible to anyone but Remus. "All this time — the changes — I tried to prevent them, but no matter what I did — I thought I was the one causing it, but it was *you* — *YOU were the anomaly* — but of *course* it would be *you* — *it was YOUR fault, all along...*"

There was no trace of tenderness left. All Remus could see or hear was Severus' hatred for him. Severus' loathing was so familiar, so ancient, it was like putting on an old pair of boots worn exactly to the pattern of his tread. "My fault...?" Remus echoed weakly. His mind was shutting down. His inhalations were coming fast and shallow. The dark was closing in. When had it gotten so dark? The clouds that blanketed the sky were greyer now, closer to the earth. So dark... Remus gasped. "Has the sun set?" he croaked.

Severus paused his tirade. "What?" he asked incredulously. "Do you even understand what — "

"Moonrise. Quarter past four. Sunset's at half-three," Remus managed to choke out.

Remus didn't think it was possible for Severus' eyes to grow wider, but as anger folded into fear his expression became truly grotesque. Remus felt as if he had been impaled and gutted. Dimly, he realised that he was standing between Severus and the egress, and he lunged out of the way. Anything to make Severus look less *horrified*. Remus lost his balance and hit the floor. Far away, he heard a voice crying out his name. Then everything went dark.

Auld Lang Syne

Remus came to in the Shrieking Shack. Morning sun was barely seeping through the boarded windows, but the room was illuminated by a harsh artificial light. Someone had taken the time to tuck him in and prop him up with pillows. He shut his eyes again and groaned. Immediately, a vial of pain potion was tipped against his lips. He swallowed.

When he opened his eyes again, Remus saw Poppy Pomfrey at his righthand side, leaning over him with visible concern. On his left was Albus Dumbledore. Remus sat up with a jolt. The motion was too sudden; he vomited. Lightning-quick, Poppy slid a porcelain basin onto his lap. Remus felt an overpowering sense of *déjà vu*. It had been exactly like this, the morning after the Incident.

As he finished emptying his stomach, Remus could feel Albus' eyes boring into him. He kept his gaze downcast. Remus' occlumency skills were unimpressive even at the best of times. (The only surefire technique he'd ever hit upon was to think very, very hard about chips and cheese. During his years with the Order, Albus — and Severus — must have thought he was a cheddar-obsessed nincompoop.)

Severus. Where was Severus? Remus scanned the room so fast it made his head spin. What had he done to Severus? He'd thought he was so clever, two years back, preventing the Incident from happening all over again. How naïve he had been! How rash! Remus had thought he'd changed the story, but he'd only delayed the inevitable. No; he'd exacerbated the inevitable. *This* was the worst that could happen. He had *made* this happen.

"Is he dead?" Remus croaked out.

Albus' expression hardened. "That depends. Who do you think has died, Mr. Lupin?"

That had to mean no, didn't it? Surely Albus wouldn't toy with him if he had actually killed someone. *Then again, wouldn't he?* "Severus," Remus whispered. "Is he dead?"

"Why would he be dead?" Albus asked, quite conversationally.

"Because I — we were together, and I transformed — oh, God, how could I...?"

“Mr. Snape brought you to the infirmary yesterday,” Poppy interjected, in a tone that was both scolding and reassuring. “It seems you had a fainting spell shortly before sunset. You’re fortunate Mr. Snape was there, and that he had the presence of mind to bring you to me. I had to send him off immediately, of course, but you ought to thank him next time you see him. As it was, Headmaster Dumbledore had to activate the emergency portkey to get you here in time.”

“There’s an emergency portkey?” Remus asked dazedly. His mind was trying to process far too much information all at once.

“Of course there’s an emergency portkey,” Poppy said.

“Remus, my boy,” said Albus, softening, “you came perilously close to transforming without any protections in place last night.”

“Yes,” Remus said.

“You were fortunate this time, but I think you know very well that you cannot afford to make mistakes like this in the future.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll be leaving Hogwarts in the spring. Once you’ve entered the real world, we can no longer guarantee your safety as we have these past seven years.”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

“Mr. Lupin, did I say something amusing?”

“Sorry, sir. I just thought it was funny that you called it the ‘real world.’”

Albus smiled back wearily. “A false distinction, perhaps, but I often find it to be a useful one.”

“I understand, Headmaster.”

Since arriving in the past, Remus had avoided speaking more than a handful of words at a time to Albus Dumbledore. It was too painful, and being around Albus always made Remus feel disoriented, like he had lost his footing. He wished to prolong their time together, and yet he also wished to escape as quickly as possible.

“Poppy, will you please grant Mr. Lupin and I a moment of privacy?” Albus asked. Remus felt sweat itching at his temples. Poppy looked displeased, but she exited the room, promising that she would be just downstairs if Remus needed anything.

“Headmaster?” Remus inquired nervously.

“Please don’t look so fearful, Mr. Lupin. You’re not in trouble. In fact, I wish to speak to you about Severus Snape.”

“Oh,” Remus said. That didn’t make him feel any better.

“You’ve become quite friendly with Mr. Snape, have you not?” Albus asked. Remus wanted to laugh. Didn’t *anyone* at this school have anything better to do than gossip about his relationship to Severus Snape?

“Yes, Headmaster,” Remus said, although he knew it was no longer true as of the previous afternoon.

“Well, I’m glad of it. It always cheers me to see new friendships blossom, especially amongst students of different Houses.” Albus didn’t look very cheered, however.

“Yes.”

“He’s a quiet boy, isn’t he?” Albus said. It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, sir. Though... not as much, once you get to know him.”

“No, I would imagine not.” Albus paused. “You haven’t noticed any... changes in his demeanour of late, have you?”

“Changes?” Remus’ mouth went dry, and for a moment he thought he would heave again. His knuckles whitened around the basin in his lap.

“Forgive me; I don’t mean to pry. Has Mr. Snape spoken to you at all of what he wishes to do after graduation? With a mind like his, I’ve no doubt he will find any number of avenues open to him...”

A mind like his; not results like his, or any of the other things professors typically remarked upon. Suddenly, Remus understood what Albus was probing him for. Albus wanted to know if Severus was a potential Death Eater. “He’s very interested in publishing some of his Potions research after school,” Remus said, sidestepping the implied question.

Albus seemed lost in thought. “I’ve no need to tell you how close Mr. Snape came to discovering your lycanthropy last night.” He never spoke in euphemisms like ‘your condition’ or ‘your illness.’

“That’s not the worst that could have happened,” Remus said miserably.

“Certainly not. Nevertheless, it was a great risk to your own safety, as well as Mr. Snape’s.”

“Yes, Headmaster.” Remus swallowed hard. “Actually, no, Headmaster. It wasn’t really. Severus already knows I’m a werewolf.” This revelation was merely meant to correct the timeline, he told himself. Severus *should* have learned Remus’ secret back in fifth year, and Albus *should* have been aware of it.

Albus was taken aback. “Remus,” he said, a sharp edge creeping into his voice, “I hope you have not been so unwise as to begin confiding freely in your classmates...”

“No! Severus... he worked it out on his own, ages ago. He’s not going to tell anyone, though. It’s how he knew to rescue me, yesterday, when I fainted.” There; Remus had backed into something that seemed reasonably plausible. In fact, every word he had spoken was true.

Albus was quiet for a long moment. “You’ve placed a great deal of trust in Mr. Snape,” he mused, as if to himself.

“I’d trust him with my life,” Remus said warmly.

“Well,” Albus said, “let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Something was beginning to dawn on Remus. He wasn’t alone. Severus knew. Severus *knew*. If Severus knew, who else knew? Did Albus know what had happened to Remus and Severus? Did he understand what was going on? Could he have the answers? Didn’t Albus Dumbledore *always* have the answers? Albus was saying something about awarding fifty points to Slytherin...

Do you know? Remus' heart began to pound. He felt Albus staring at him and rapidly calculated the risks. Then he threw that calculation straight out the window and looked boldly into Albus' eyes. *Do you?* Suddenly, Remus had no control over the images that danced through his mind. He was offering a piece of chocolate to Harry Potter. He was holding Teddy in his arms, singing a Welsh lullaby. He was weeping over Albus' tomb.

Albus held his gaze for the span of several breaths, then looked away, reaching for his pocket-watch. "Well, Mr. Lupin. I think it's time we deliver you back to the castle. I hear there's going to be plum pudding with supper."

"Wait," Remus whispered raggedly, grasping at Albus' plush velvet sleeve. "You looked, didn't you?" Remus searched Albus' face in desperation. "You looked, and what you saw there didn't make sense, did it?" *Could it?*

Remus thought that Albus seemed troubled, just briefly, before he schooled his features back into his usual benign half-smile. "There are a great many things in this world that I don't understand, Mr. Lupin." He rose and swept out of the room, leaving Remus more bereft and confused than he had ever felt before.

Remus spent the next three days watching the Map like a hawk, but Severus never left the Slytherin dorms. On the first day, Remus sat outside the entrance to Slytherin for hours, waiting, thinking the man had to come out eventually; but it was no use. Remus went through the motions of feeding and caring for his own body, but he felt utterly disconnected from himself. His mind was racing. What was Severus thinking? How could Severus leave him alone with his thoughts like this?

On the fourth day, Remus visited the kitchens. Talking to the house elves made him feel a bit better, brought him back to earth; he hadn't spoken to anyone since the morning after the full moon. Then, very casually, he asked after Severus. Had anyone seen him? Surely someone had been bringing him meals? Finally he was able to get some information out of Lissy, who had been leaving trays of food outside the seventh-year Slytherin boys' dormitory. After a bit of flattery and begging her to save him a dance at the Hogmanay ceilidh, Remus persuaded Lissy to sneak a note under the Welsh rabbit she would be delivering to Severus that evening. Really, it was a win-win for Remus; Lissy was a much better dancer than any of the humans, although the height difference made Remus look rather ungraceful next to her. Now he just needed to come up with something to write on the note. Deciding that simplicity was best, Remus wrote in large letters that filled the square of scrap paper:

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THIS. – R. Lupin

Remus waited anxiously for a response, but nothing arrived, and Severus' name remained planted in the boys' dorm. The following day, Remus sent another note with the Mushroom Wellington.

NOT ABOUT THE KISSING. ABOUT THE OTHER THING.

The day after that was New Year's Eve, and Remus made sure to get his third note out with breakfast, so that the house elves could enjoy their well-deserved holiday.

IF YOU DON'T TALK TO ME, I'LL MAKE IT WORSE.

There. That seemed sufficiently threatening yet nonspecific. After sending the note, Remus resolved to enjoy the rest of the holiday. He didn't really expect a response from Severus that day, anyway. An outside observer might wonder how Remus could possibly attend a celebration while his mind was in such disarray; but Remus had already been cooped up for a week, alternating between light panic (*what do I do now?*) and questioning his very existence (*is any of this real?*). He needed to feel present. He needed to feel like himself again.

For the evening festivities, Remus borrowed the full black-tie kilt ensemble that Sirius had splashed out on and then worn exactly once, when he had stayed for winter hols the year before. ("What's the point of living in the Highlands for seven years if I don't get to wear a kilt *one time*?") Sirius had even gone to the trouble of discovering the clan tartan of a dubious distant relation. ("Tell me, Sirius, why have you never applied these research skills to your schoolwork?") Remus paused to admire himself in the mirror before heading down to the feast. In his own humble estimation, he *did* look quite fetching in evening wear, and with the shoulder padding he could even *almost* pass for an adult.

The haggis was extraordinary, and the cranachan — made with fresh raspberries magically preserved since the first blush of June — divine, but Remus made sure not to gorge himself; he didn't want too much heavy food jostling in his stomach during the dance. Remus was a competent dancer, and he enjoyed the boisterous physicality of country dancing more than any other style. For some reason, people were always surprised to learn this about him, and he liked that too; it was probably the only *pleasant* surprise about himself that he could boast of. He always regretted that there had been no dancing at his wedding.

A few of the students — particularly the English ones — looked completely at sea, so Remus went out of his way to ask them to dance. Lissy joined him for Strip the Willow, and when it came time for them to spin together, Remus gripped her arms firmly and lifted her off her feet, whirling her in midair like a helicopter blade as she laughed uproariously. Then, forgetting to adjust his grip for the next girl he twirled, he accidentally flung the poor first-year and sent her skidding across the floor; but she seemed to find it hilarious, so Remus didn't stop to check on her. He had to keep pace, after all. By the end of the dance, he was breathless and his entire upper body ached. It was the most fun he'd had in ages.

As a rule, Minerva didn't dance with students, but Remus badgered her until she agreed to one dance, seeing as he was Head Boy and it would be his last chance before graduation. They partnered for the Gay Gordons, and while Remus nominally led the dance, Minerva was in control. Remus felt like a complete novice next to her. Fortunately, he was prepared; it was the same dance they had shared the year he taught at Hogwarts. A strange idea struck him. Could Minerva be from the future, too? He watched her face closely for any sign of recognition as they danced, but he didn't sense anything out of the ordinary, and for his trouble he ended up stumbling over his own feet.

As the evening drew to a close and everyone linked arms for Auld Lang Syne, Remus' eyes became misty. This year, Burns' poetry hit him in a profoundly different way. Remus wasn't nostalgic or melancholy, exactly; he was awed. He felt completely, incredibly, intoxicatingly present and *real*. Remus yearned to seize the moment and wring every last drop of meaning from it, to keep feeling that way again and again and again; but the moment was fleeting, and that was the beauty of it. As they all rushed into the middle of the circle, his heart rushed forward too; forward like the inexorable rush of time. Then backward again, for one final verse.

Remus hummed cheerfully as he escorted the small handful of remaining Gryffindors back to the tower. He sent them off to bed and then sat before the fire in the common room for a little while, waiting for his ears to stop ringing and his thoughts to stop clamouring.

He needn't have bothered. The moment he opened the door to his dormitory, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Remus just barely stopped himself from cursing, crying out "Severus!" instead. Severus was sitting on the edge of Remus' bed, glowering, silhouetted by the light from the window and the smouldering fire, which roared back to life when Remus entered. Remus wondered if Severus knew that it was his bed, or if he'd simply chosen the one closest to the door. "How did you get in — no, never mind, that's not important right now."

"Did you have *fun* at the party tonight? How did it feel to fiddle while Rome burns?" Severus snarled. He clearly did not like to be kept waiting. How many hours had he sat there rehearsing that line?

"I wasn't on the fiddle, that was Pomona Sprout," Remus said, refusing to indulge him. He carefully hung his borrowed jacket on the railing of Sirius' bed, giving it a quick brush with his hands as he did. Remus had been rehearsing for this moment, too, and he would not allow it to decline into melodrama.

Severus rose and pivoted; now he loomed by the door. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for us even to speak to one another? Do you understand that every time we interact, we tear at the fabric of time itself?"

"Yes," Remus said impatiently. He came around to sit on his bed, in the spot Severus had just vacated. "And do you realise how dangerous it is for us *not* to discuss this? Please, be rational. If we continue to act independently without keeping one another apprised, we exponentially increase our risk of tearing the *fabric of time* into tatters. Surely you must see that, Severus. Or have you let your personal feelings cloud your better judgment?" That last part was a low blow and Remus knew it, but it was sure to provoke a response. Something like uncertainty flickered on Severus' face, and Remus knew he had hit his mark.

"How long?" Severus finally asked, as if the words were dragged from him by force.

"Since fifth year. The night before — "

"Before you and your friends nearly murdered me."

"Yes. That's the one. And ever since then — "

"Ever since then, I've been cleaning up your messes while you traipse about doing whatever you

please, just like you did the first time around.”

Remus laughed incredulously, but it sounded more like he’d been punched in the gut. “Is that what you think I’ve been doing?”

“Isn’t it, *Head Boy*?”

“Hang on. That wasn’t on purpose. I didn’t ask for it. It just… happened.”

“Oh, I’m sure. A lot of things have *just happened* to you these past two years, haven’t they, Lupin? All this time, I have painstakingly devoted myself to keeping this timeline on the correct course. Every time something changed, I tried to minimise the impact and set things to right. But now I see that I missed the root of the problem. I should have known that *you* were the one making my life so difficult. Fool me once…”

Remus could barely believe what he was hearing. Severus blamed him. Severus believed that Remus was complicit — complacent — in the very changes he had worked so hard to prevent. All of those tears, the anguish, the sleepless nights, the terrible moral prevarication, all of his secret suffering — here it all was, chewed over and spat right back in his face. But then, wasn’t Severus right? Was he really accusing Remus of anything for which Remus had not already blamed himself?

As Remus swiftly cycled through the events of the past two years, something clicked into place. “That day by the lake,” he said with wonder, “the thunderstorm… that was *your* magic, wasn’t it?”

Severus blanched. “That was unintentional. I have not been so careless since.”

“No,” Remus said slowly. “You’re not *careless* like me, are you? You’re an absolute stickler, aren’t you, keeping everything in line? You, Severus, you never even think about yourself; only the greater good. You would never deliberately alter the past. By the way, how’s your *best friend* Lily Evans? Called her the ‘M’ word lately?” Severus flinched slightly. “Come to think of it, I don’t see you hanging about your old Slytherin pals much at all these days. Did you run out of things to talk about with them?”

Severus’ nostrils flared, and Remus knew he had him backed into a corner. “That’s different,” Severus growled. “It’s an immaterial change.”

“Immaterial.” Remus rolled the word across his tongue. “I suppose *immaterial* means when *you* change something. When I change something, that’s called making a mess.”

“No,” Severus said. His tone was somewhere between dangerous and frantic. “Immaterial means that when the time comes, *I* will still do what must be done.” He rolled up his sleeve and thrust out his arm, revealing the Dark Mark that stood out starkly on his sallow skin. He didn’t withdraw it. He just held it there, tendons straining.

“Ah,” Remus sighed. He was caught off guard, but not shocked. Internally, he swelled with sadness and compassion. “Yes, Severus, I trust you will do what must be done. As will I.”

Severus shrank back and cradled his arm protectively against his abdomen; it was probably an unconscious action. “Is that a threat?” he asked.

“What? No.” Remus, confused, mentally repeated the words he had just spoken. Oh. It did sound rather threatening, if one lacked the necessary context. “I see. Severus, it’s all right. I know about you. I know that you were loyal to the Order all along.”

Severus' frown deepened. "You came here from May of 1998, did you not?"

"Yes. I suppose we should have established that earlier. That was careless on both our parts."

"Then, Lupin, unless you hit your head very hard on the edge of the spacetime continuum, you should remember that I..." He snapped his mouth shut, as if suddenly thinking better of it.

"No, Severus, I mean I *know*. I do remember, and I also know that you were under deep cover all through that last year. Harry told me."

Severus' expression went blank. "Harry told you?" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

"To be honest, Severus, I can't recall all the details. He told me a lot of things, but it was really touch-and-go after the battle. I was in and out of consciousness, and then suddenly I was here. But I do remember some of the salient points, and I know that you were on our side."

Then Severus did something Remus did not expect. He slid down the wall and sat on the floor, curling his knees inward and propping his head in his hands. His face showed no emotion, still; its lines were nearly smooth. Remus suspected he was in shock. Several minutes passed, during which the only sounds were the crackling fire and Remus' inordinately loud breathing. Finally, without looking up, Severus asked, "You remember after the battle?"

"Yes," Remus said. He wanted to ask, *don't you?*, but he was fairly certain he already knew the answer. "We won, Severus," he said gently. "Voldemort is dead."

"Oh." Severus released a long, shaky exhalation. "Good."

"Yes," Remus said again. "And we can't afford to let it happen any other way. There's too much at stake." He got up from the bed and lowered himself next to Severus on the floor. "I know you may not believe me now, but our purpose is the same. We both know we must do everything in our power to ensure that Harry Potter destroys Voldemort. I believe we'll be much more effective if we work together."

Severus looked askance at Remus. "And you want me to trust you implicitly. You want me to believe that you're capable of abandoning your friends to their fates. Do you actually think you have it in you, Lupin? Are you really going to sit back and do nothing when the opportunity arises for you to play the hero and save them?"

Remus screwed his eyes shut against the sting of tears. Hearing the words from another person's mouth was just as abhorrent as he had imagined. He opened his eyes again and pointed. "That's Peter's bed," he said. "I've had nearly two years of unfettered access to his person. Has he turned up dead yet?"

"Mere cowardice," Severus spat. "Or, worse, some sort of misplaced loyalty."

"Perhaps. Even so." Remus studied the scar on his palm, absently tracing the line downward.

"Severus, I should tell you that my wife died during the battle. My son is — was — will be? — not even two weeks old, and he was left without his mother. He may be left without his father, too — last I remember, my prognosis didn't seem too promising. But because of us, he's going to grow up in a safer world. Nothing, *nothing*, is more important than that."

There was an uncomfortable lull, until at last Severus murmured, "I was not aware you had a child."

"No, well, we did try to keep the news from getting out. But yes, I have a child. Teddy." Remus felt

himself smiling as he said his son's name. He'd not spoken it aloud in nearly two years.

"I see."

"Do you see?" Remus looked up at Severus. "I hope so. Look, Severus, you may not believe that I have the courage to follow through out of conviction, or love for humanity, or sense of duty, or anything else like that. And you may be right. My moral fibre is weaker than I care to admit. But if nothing else, believe that I'll do it out of self-interest. I'll do it for my child."

"Your child," Severus said, "may never be born now. Nothing is certain."

Remus swallowed back a sob. "I know that. But other children will be."

"Hm." Severus looked contemplatively at Remus. "You Gryffindors have a skewed concept of what 'self-interest' means."

Remus laughed, in spite of everything, but his laugh was harsh and short-lived. "So, what's your justification? If you didn't even know we won, why have you been working so hard to keep things the same? I shouldn't presume, but... I know that fate hasn't always been kind to you, Severus. Forgive me, but why should *I* trust *you* to follow through? I don't see what you would stand to lose in changing the past."

"You're right; you shouldn't presume," Severus snapped. "It's true that I didn't know we had won the war, but as far as I was aware, we hadn't lost it either." He took a deep breath. "When the Dark Lord attempts to kill Harry Potter in 1981, he will be significantly weakened and go into hiding for a decade. His followers will be fragmented and cut off from one another, and his less fanatical admirers will abandon him altogether. And he does have numerous admirers, at this point. People tend to conveniently forget that part of the story. If Voldemort is allowed to survive through 1981, for all we know he could be Minister of Magic in 1982. There are too many variables at play."

Remus nodded. It was surprisingly reassuring to know that Severus was thinking along the same lines as himself. Sardonically, he suggested, "I suppose we could always just kill him ourselves."

Severus snorted. "If you have a plan, I'd love to hear it," he replied. "Preferably one that won't deprive the Order of two of its most useful members when it fails."

Remus batted his lashes. "Severus! You think I'm *useful*? You're too, too sweet."

"I think that letting you die would, at this time, be inexpedient."

"Oh! Be still my heart!"

"Do you take *anything* seriously?" Severus snarled.

Remus stopped smiling. "I take everything seriously, Severus. But we all have our ways of coping."

They were quiet for some time after that, but there was something else that Remus itched to know. "How have you kept it from Lily?" he asked, gesturing toward Severus' left arm.

"I've never looked good in t-shirts," Severus replied drily.

"She thinks that you've changed your mind."

"I know." Severus said. "She's not wrong, is she?"

“Mm. She thinks you’ve cut ties with your Death Eater housemates.”

“Yes. That’s mostly true. I didn’t need them to persuade me to join. I went to the Dark Lord alone, this time.”

Remus shuddered. “And you weren’t concerned about how *that* might change things?” he asked. He had never known Severus to be so reckless. It made him angry.

“I weighed my options for some time. Ultimately, I could not see any disadvantage to making the Dark Lord trust me even more. And he does. He likes knowing that I came to him directly, that I didn’t need convincing. I’m a true believer, dyed in the wool.” Severus shrugged listlessly.

“Perhaps I judged wrong. We’ll find out, sooner or later.”

“That we will,” Remus said. “We’ve both had to make difficult choices, Severus. But from now on, we don’t have to make them alone anymore.” Or so he hoped.

Severus said nothing, and as the silence stretched between them, Remus grew increasingly afraid of how he might respond. He broke the silence himself before it could become too agonising. “Well, I’ve no idea what time it is, but since it was well after midnight when I came in, I think it’s fair to call it a night. We’ve both done a thorough job of eviscerating one another. I’m sure you’re as exhausted as I am.”

“Mm.” Severus didn’t open his eyes.

“Stay here tonight.” At that, Severus spasmed to attention, looking at Remus as if he’d just suggested he — well — spend a night in the lions’ den. “Take my bed,” Remus insisted, amused by Severus’ reaction. “I can sleep in one of the others. Probably James’. Not Sirius’; too much dog hair. And drool.”

“Pot, kettle, Black,” Severus said with a smirk.

Remus groaned. “Severus, I heard that capital B and I want you to know I’ve got no capacity for wordplay right now. Look, you had a chance to change into your nice comfy quarrelling clothes before you came here tonight. I’ve sat through this entire altercation in dress shoes that aren’t even mine. And that’s after dancing with a house elf! I’m tired and I’m sore.” Remus stood up, stretched, and then retrieved his folded pyjamas from under the quilt on his bed. Then he walked over to James’ bed. He drew the curtains and changed behind them, though it was hard to feel too self-conscious about his body after laying his soul so brutally bare. “Stay or go, I don’t mind either way, as long as you don’t wake me before noon,” Remus called out. “Good night, Severus.” He didn’t receive an answer. He wasn’t sure if Severus was still in the room. He didn’t have much time to reflect before he drifted into a deep and mercifully dreamless sleep.

Mind-Body Problems

Remus awoke well past noon on New Year's Day, feeling more relaxed than he had in a long time. James' pillow was far more comfortable than his own. (How was that fair? Had he charmed it? Brought it from home? Bribe a house elf?) Moreover, something smelled incredible. Remus pulled back the curtains. At the foot of his — well, James' — bed, he found a tray laden with a massive fry-up that was still lightly sizzling. As he tucked in, Remus noticed a slip of parchment poking out from under the plate. He pulled it out, smudging it with grease, and read the distinctive cramped handwriting:

Moral fibre has nothing to do with it. It would take courage to change the past, yet it would be shameful to gamble with the fate of humanity for one's own happiness. It's cowardly to do nothing, yet doing nothing may be the most courageous option. Either way, our souls are damned for eternity.

"Charming," Remus muttered to himself. He wadded up the note and cast it into the fire, knowing it would be difficult to explain if anyone else found it. Yet, somehow, damned or not, Remus felt light as air. He had harboured his secret in silence for so long. Now he had tangible proof that he wasn't descending into madness *entirely* alone, and it was a tremendous relief.

After Remus finished eating he felt just about ready to go back to bed. He moved to his own bed, smirking when he found a strand of long, straight black hair on his pillow. "Who's the shedder now? Pot, kettle, black," he said to the empty room. After brushing the hair aside, he buried his face in the pillow and inhaled. Until then, he hadn't identified any particular scent with Severus Snape (other than Wolfsbane and dungeonish mildew), but now he recognised the warm and very human smell that clung to the fabric. Remus sighed. They *were* going to have to talk about the kissing thing, eventually. It wasn't quite as high priority as weighing the fate of the world between them, but they couldn't put it off forever. Remus curled up on his lumpy old pillow and gave himself over to hypnagogic daydreams.

By the time Remus stirred again, it was after three and the light was fading outside. God, when was the last time he'd spent an entire day abed by choice, and not out of medical necessity? He felt like an absolute hedonist. He thought he'd better enjoy it while it lasted. The other students would be returning the next day.

Remus tried to relax and read, but he eventually gave in and admitted to himself that he'd been staring at the same paragraph for half an hour. As it turned out, it was difficult to have a quiet

evening in when one's understanding of reality had rather shifted overnight. Remus had so many questions for Severus, and he was driving himself mad repeating them over and over in his own mind. He knew that once term began, it would be harder to meet openly with Severus to talk things through. That was what finally spurred him to act.

He toyed with the idea of sending a note down to the dungeons, or even an owl, but he didn't fancy the walk, and owls couldn't swim. He also wasn't eager to go and pound on the door of the Slytherin common room. There was only one thing for it. He watched the Map for some time, making sure that Severus was not only alone, but that no one else was even close to his vicinity. Then he gripped his wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

After sending off his patronus Remus sat back, Map in hand. He watched the clock nervously. A quarter-hour passed, then another. At last, he saw the dot labelled 'Severus Snape' emerge from the Slytherin dorms. Success. When the dot drew close to the Gryffindor entrance, Remus ran down to meet him at the portrait door. "Hello, Severus," he said pleasantly. "Come in, before someone sees you." He escorted Severus to his dormitory, as if Severus didn't already know the way.

Once inside, Remus sat in his usual spot on his bed. Severus stood by the door, just as he had the night before. He crossed his arms and scowled at Remus. Remus smiled back. He had no idea where to begin. For some moments, they were locked in a sort of silent staring contest.

The lines around Severus' mouth twitched. It looked as if he were fighting through an inner conflict over whether or not to speak. Remus observed him curiously. Finally, with an annoyed grimace, Severus said, "Fine. I'll bite. Who impregnated your patronus?"

Remus burst out laughing. He laughed until he began to run out of air and the peals dissolved into a soundless wheeze. When he was finally able to look Severus in the eye again, Severus was still standing in the same posture, looking disgruntled. "Sorry," Remus gasped, "I'm sorry. Just... it's a patronus, Severus. It doesn't have biological functions." He took a deep, stabilising breath. "That's the way she's always looked, since I was young. I like to imagine her as the she-wolf who suckled Remus and Romulus."

Severus raised his eyebrows. "Rather heavy-handed symbolism, don't you think?"

Remus shrugged. "Lucky for me, I don't have a brother." He felt another aftershock of laughter coming on.

"It isn't *that* funny," Severus grumbled.

"Just — " Remus fanned himself furiously as he tried to regain his breath. "Just, the *idea*." He began to simmer down to more of a giggle. "You weren't *concerned*, were you, Severus? Because, you know, that day in the Potions lab, you did get a bit of your patronus in my patronus..."

"Don't be vulgar, Lupin."

"*Insemino Patronum?*"

Severus pulled a face. "Trust you to take one of the purest forms of magic known to humankind and turn it into a crass joke."

"It's not my fault. You're the one that fixated on my patronus' teats."

"You're revolting."

"I know," Remus sighed contentedly, wiping a stray tear from his eye.

Severus glared. "If you can collect yourself for a moment," he said sternly, "did you call me up here for a reason? Or was it just for your own amusement?"

Remus tried to rearrange his smile into a look of contrition. "Oh, Severus," he said, "I'm not laughing at you. You just caught me by surprise. I haven't laughed that hard in... God, I don't even know. It felt really good, though."

Was it Remus' imagination, or did Severus's shoulders relax just a bit? "You wanted to ask me something, Lupin?"

"About a hundred things," Remus said. "Don't you? But first, I wanted to thank you for rescuing me the night of the full moon. I'm sorry I ever put you in that position. I don't even want to think what might have happened if you hadn't been there. I'm ashamed of myself, Severus."

"That's not a question," Severus said flatly. Remus winced.

"All right, let's move on to questions, then. Go on, sit down, you're making me nervous." Severus did not sit down. "Right," Remus sighed. "Well. Let's start with the obvious. I presume you don't have any better sense of what's happened to us than I do."

Severus' lip quivered, as if it would physically pain him to say 'no.' "I'm still researching," he conceded.

"Ah. *You're* the reason I haven't been able to get my hands on *Essential Writings on Temporal Permutation*, aren't you? I've had it on hold all year."

"I was planning to 'lose' that one," Severus admitted.

"Of course you were. Next question. You really had no idea about me?"

Severus frowned. "I knew that something was off. Everything has been different, but you seemed... more different than anyone else. I admit, however, that I assumed there was another explanation."

"Right. Same with you. I just wondered if... you know, you could have used legilimency... I mean, I'm rather relieved you didn't, but..."

Severus' scowl darkened. "I tried," he said. "I haven't been able to use it since I arrived."

"*Really?* That's very interesting."

"Interesting?" Severus repeated. "This isn't an academic exercise, Lupin."

"What about occlumency?" Remus asked, brushing off his last comment.

Severus shrugged. "As far as I can tell, that still works. If not, I'm fucked, and by extension so are you."

"I suppose you're right. Please, Severus, will you sit down already? That reminds me of another question — why did you help me practise my Patronus Charm?"

"Because you were meant to have learned it by then, and it's essential that you master the skill. Of course, if I'd realised you were only holding back in class, I wouldn't have bothered."

Remus shook his head. "I wasn't, though. I really couldn't summon my patronus before you helped me."

"I see." Severus looked thoughtful. Finally he sat, eschewing the furniture and sinking to the floor right where he was.

"Aren't you curious why that is?" Remus asked.

"Not really," Severus said. "We've both experienced... disruptions. It's natural that any spell tied to memory and emotion would be affected." Well, now who was speaking academically?

"But you didn't have any trouble casting your patronus, did you?"

"No." Remus might have expected Severus to be more smug about it than he was.

"It was quite brilliant, actually, using Pseudoamortentia to help cast the Patronus Charm. I'd say it was worth all the trouble, just to test that out."

"It was a strong hypothesis. Olfaction is directly linked to memory, more so than any of the other senses."

"And the potion produces smells linked to one's happiest memories. Yes, as I said, quite brilliant. Suspiciously brilliant, for a sixth-year student. In hindsight." Remus grinned.

"I could have done it when I was in sixth year," Severus retorted defensively. "Although," he admitted, "I hadn't done as much research on cognition at that point."

"Mmhmm. By the way, I *know* you didn't actually make Pseudoamortentia back when we were in school. Before, I figured it was just because you'd been saddled with James as your Potions partner, but now I wonder. What made you decide to do it this time?"

"I began the project some years ago, but I never had much time to devote to it. It was an opportunity to finally see it through."

"...Now that we quite literally have a surplus of time, yes. Let me guess, it's an immaterial change?" Remus meant it to sound teasing, but he couldn't quite keep the edge out of his voice.

"It's already proven useful," Severus snapped.

"Severus. There's nothing wrong with admitting that you wanted to work on the potion because it interested you." From the way Severus shifted, Remus thought he had correctly guessed the cause of his discomfort. "Really. I know you take your duties seriously, as do I. I know you've been on guard ever since we arrived here. But can you honestly say you've done *nothing* just for the fun of it in *two years*?"

"This isn't a holiday, Lupin."

"No, but there's no shame in doing something for your own enjoyment every once in a while."

"You *would* say that."

Remus shrugged. "I would. And I'm not ashamed of it. Believe me, I'm miserable most of the time; but I've also, against all odds, been granted more time with several people that I love very much, and I don't want to squander it any more than I already have. I *know* you understand what I'm talking about. You can't honestly tell me that you regret spending more time with Lily, can

you?”

Severus flushed. “Don’t talk about things you know nothing about, Lupin,” he hissed.

Nothing? Rubbish. Remus leaned back on his bed and rolled his eyes as far as they could stretch. “Right. Of course. How could I *possibly* hope to understand what you’re going through? You’re completely unique and entirely alone; no one on earth has ever experienced anything remotely similar. Oh, wait...!”

“If you’ve finished mocking me now, Lupin, I’m going to excuse myself from the rest of your little... wallow, or whatever this is,” Severus growled.

Remus snapped upright again. “I’m not mocking — ” He paused, frowning. “Actually, I am. You know what? I *am* mocking you, because you’re being bloody irritating, and it makes me feel better.”

“I’ve barely said anything. You’re projecting.”

“Maybe,” Remus said hotly. “Maybe this has been festering for a while and I just need an outlet. Goddamnit, Severus, now I’m not sure if I’m annoyed with you or with myself. How did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything. This seems like something you need to sort out for yourself. Good evening, Lupin.” Severus rose and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Remus stood too. “Wait, please, Severus. I’m sorry. This is all so...” He gesticulated helplessly. “It’s just bizarre to be talking about it. I’ve been living with this secret for two years, thinking I might have to live with it forever, and now I come to find out there’s someone else who understands... I’m scared, Severus. I don’t want to go back to not talking about it.”

“And if I do?”

Remus hadn’t considered that possibility. He felt absolutely powerless. “Then we won’t talk about it, I suppose. But I would be distraught.”

“You’re already distraught,” Severus said coolly.

“You should have seen me before. Just ask Moaning Myrtle.” Remus sighed and sat back down. “Look, I meant what I said last night. I think it would be foolish of us not to work together on this. But you’re right, too. I crossed a line. I shouldn’t have let myself get so emotional about it.” He rubbed his temples. “Honestly, I don’t understand what’s happening to me. I’ve got a hair-trigger temper these days. There’ve been so many arguments, and outbursts, and tears — you have no idea. I swear I was never like this before. It’s like I’ve lost my self-control. Or my common sense.”

“You have,” Severus said, “more or less.”

“Pardon?”

“Somehow, you’ve returned to the body you had twenty years ago. Your brain is a part of that body. Setting aside, of course, all theories of mind, soul, *mens* and *anima*” — Severus touched his forehead, as if somehow this would help illustrate his point — “what you’re left with is a physical organ that is literally structured differently from your mature adult brain.”

“Right. Err, I think I follow.”

“Your prefrontal cortex doesn’t finish developing until you’re in your mid-twenties. That’s the part of your brain that handles decision-making, judgment, impulse control, the ability to consider the longterm consequences of your actions — in short, everything you might call ‘common sense.’”

“Oh.” Remus reflected for a moment. “So I suppose I actually *was* like this before. I just don’t remember it that way.”

“No, well, you wouldn’t. Young people never *think* they’re being foolish or shortsighted. However,” Severus admitted, “you may be correct about your temper growing worse. You have more to be angry about, now.”

“You make a good point. Severus, that’s — that’s actually very reassuring, oddly enough. I thought I was losing my mind.” Remus smiled thinly. “Now I know I only lost a bit of it.”

“None of this absolves you of responsibility,” Severus said sharply, departing from his lecture mode.

“Of course not.”

“It just means that you and I need to be on guard against our own amygdalae. We must be self-aware, control our impulses, interrogate any emotional responses that threaten to cloud our judgment.”

“Yes. I agree.” Remus fought the lump that was forming in his throat, the clench in his stomach. *Go away, Emotion! Didn’t you hear a word we just said?*

“Good.” Severus hesitated for a moment, then said, “Truce, then.”

“Truce. Splendid.” In fact, *truce* seemed like a massive step back from where their relationship had been a week earlier, but Remus would take whatever Severus was willing to offer. “And I want to apologise for lashing out. I’m sorry, Severus.”

“I don’t believe you,” Severus said, crossing his arms. “I don’t believe you’re really sorry for *half* the things you apologise for. No one can be *that* sorry all the time. You wouldn’t be able to function.”

Remus was stung, but only for a moment before he realised that Severus was actually ribbing him. “I wouldn’t be so sure. I’m a master of self-deprecation. The undefeated champion. I could self-deprecate you right to the ground, any day.”

Severus snorted. “There’s that famous Gryffindor confidence shining through.”

Remus smiled. “Thank you, Severus. For being open to a truce. And for comforting me tonight.”

Severus looked baffled. It was a funny expression on him. “I did nothing of the sort,” he said.

“You did. I happen to find cold hard facts very comforting, especially at times like these.”

“You mean honesty and directness? That’s rich, coming from you,” Severus sneered, though without much malice.

“Tell me, Severus, which part of the brain is it that makes you reflexively disagree with everything I say?”

“I don’t disagree with everything you say,” Severus retorted. His lips curled into a tiny smile, even

as he tried to look petulant. Remus laughed.

“Fine then. Good night, Severus,” Remus said. He hadn’t even scratched the surface of the questions he’d wanted to ask, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember what he had intended to say.

“It’s not nighttime yet. Good *evening*, Lupin,” Severus replied before seeing himself out.

Remus spent the next morning tidying the dorm; in two weeks of staying there alone he had let his things expand, or rather explode, to fill the space. His friends returned in the late afternoon. They all seemed a little more subdued and tired than Remus had expected, but he was thrilled to see them nevertheless. Sirius had spent the past two weeks moving into his new flat in muggle London, not far from the entrance to Diagon Alley. He gushed unceasingly about all the strange and wondrous features of his new home: it was warmed by funny-looking iron pipes filled with hot steam, there was an astonishing machine above the cooker that created little whirlwinds, and for some mysterious reason neither he nor James had been able to parse, there was even an *electrical outlet* in the *loo*. He waxed rhapsodical, too, about the bright orange wallpaper, and the downstairs laundrette, and walking to the corner shop for sweets and magazines. Remus grinned as he listened to Sirius enumerate all of his new discoveries. The novelty would wear off eventually, but Remus wanted his friend’s jovial enthusiasm to last forever.

He caught up with Lily, too. She told him about Christmas displays in department store windows, and her first time taking the train from London to Birmingham all on her own, and Petunia’s *horrible* new beau, and how the three of them had gone to see *Star Wars* when it opened at the local cinema, but she could barely enjoy the film because he kept making snide comments about how ‘unrealistic’ it was. They also chatted about the Potions project they were plotting together. Lily was very eager to study the Inconstant Moon Elixir (even the name was embarrassingly euphemistic!), which was meant to regulate the menstrual cycle. The instructions were arcane, and there was so little written about it that it was difficult to discern which elements were sound magical theory and which parts were, as the muggles would say, pure ‘hocus-pocus.’ Lily was thrilled that she could finish her N.E.W.T. year with a project that blended Potions and feminist sociology (a subject that was terribly underrepresented in the Hogwarts curriculum), and Remus was secretly chuffed to bits that he had brought it to her attention. If Severus was annoyed that Remus had stolen his favourite Potions partner, he didn’t make a scene about it.

Peter was especially quiet and withdrawn, although he did regale them with the story of how his little sister June lost her front tooth in a piece of bubblegum she’d stolen from her younger sibling, and the screaming match that had ensued. After a cursory catching-up, Peter excused himself to take a nap, while Remus helped James and Sirius unpack and bragged about dancing with Professor McGonagall.

Late that evening, after James and Sirius had both gone to sleep, Peter reemerged. Remus was just drifting off himself when he heard Peter tiptoeing toward his bed. “Knock knock,” Peter whispered through the curtain.

“Who’s there?” Remus whispered back.

“A rat.”

“A rat, who?”

“A rational person on the edge of a nervous breakdown.”

“Oh, dear. You’d better come in, then.” Remus opened the curtains to let Peter in. They both sat cross-legged on the bed, facing each other. Remus closed the curtains again.

“What is it, Peter?” Remus cast a quick *muffliato*, hoping the buzzing it generated would not be audible from Sirius’ bed.

Peter looked down at his chewed-off nails. He hadn’t chewed his nails in months. What had happened over the holiday? “Moony,” Peter began. His voice was thick, like he had phlegm caught in his throat. “I’ve been wanting to ask for a while. How did you know that you were... I mean, how did you *know* that you liked... erm...?”

“How did I know that I’m bisexual?” Remus guessed. Suddenly his throat felt thick, too.

“Yes. How did you know for certain?”

Remus wasn’t sure how to answer. No one had ever asked him quite like that, not even Tonks. He was prepared to explain *when*, but not *how*. “I suppose... well, I suppose I always liked all different kinds of people, even when I was younger. Then I started to realise that I didn’t have different kinds of feelings for different kinds of people. It was all the same, in here.” He placed a hand over his heart. “It’s something you just sort of... know, once you know it. You know?”

Despite Remus’ utter incoherence, Peter nodded fervidly. “I do. Moony, I’ve never told anyone, but I think I might be the same. Only... not with girls. Just boys.”

“You think you might be gay?” Remus asked, trying to keep the surprise out of his voice. This had never come up before. How had he not known? But then, had he ever given any thought at all to Peter’s love life? The thought made him feel strangely guilty.

“Yes,” Peter said, “I guess so.”

Something clicked into place. “James?” Remus mouthed. Even with *muffliato* encasing them, he dared not say it any louder. Peter turned red and nodded again. His eyes were becoming glassy. “Oh, Peter,” Remus whispered, “I’m so sorry.” He meant it, truly.

“Don’t be.” Peter shrugged, but it didn’t come off as casually as he intended. He looked into Remus’ eyes. “Did you ever...?” He jerked his head to the side, vaguely indicating the rest of the dormitory.

“Oh, no,” Remus said. “Ever hear the expression ‘don’t shit where you eat?’”

Peter’s face crinkled in disgust. “No, but I can suss out the meaning.” Remus smiled wryly.

“Really, though, I am sorry.”

“And really, though, it’s all right. It’s not nearly as bad as it used to be. I love James and Lily together, really I do. I’m so happy for them.”

“But...?”

“There is no ‘but.’” Peter frowned. “The thing is, there’s a man,” he said after a deep sigh.

“A man...?”

“He comes to see me sometimes. We meet in Hogsmeade, late at night.”

Remus gaped at Peter. “When? How?”

Peter looked fondly exasperated. “Well, you see, I do this neat trick where I turn myself very small...”

“Right. Of course.” Remus was stunned. He wasn’t sure which part to process first, but in that moment concern overrode all else. “So, this whole conversation — it’s not just hypothetical, is it?”

“Not anymore, no.”

“This man. He’s older than y— us?”

“Not by that much,” Peter said defensively.

Remus struggled to keep the disapproval off his face. “Peter. This man, has he tried to make you do anything you’re not comfortable with? Has he ever made you feel unsafe?”

Peter’s eyes widened. “Remus! You sound like my mum! Not that I’d ever tell my mum about him. But if I did, she’d sound just like you.”

“That’s my job. I’m your friend.” Actually, at that moment, he felt much more like Peter’s mum than a friend, but Peter didn’t need to know that.

Peter bit his lip nervously. “I saw him over the holidays,” he said.

“Ah.” Remus waited patiently.

“We met up in London. He got us a hotel room.”

“Oh, Peter.” Remus’ chest felt tight. *Poor, poor, stupid, silly boy.*

“I told my mum I was staying with Sirius.”

“And he vouched for you?” Remus asked.

“Yes. Sort of. I really did stay with him the first night. The second, erm, I told him I went out with some of my muggle friends from primary school, and asked him to cover for me.” Peter shrugged. “He was cross with me for not inviting him along, but he didn’t seem suspicious.”

“That figures.” Remus shifted, feeling a cramp forming in his leg. “Peter, I know you don’t want to hear this from me, but you’ve *got* to be more careful. Sneaking around with an older man, someone you know nothing about...”

“I never said that,” Peter snapped.

“No,” said Remus, “but — ”

“Come on, Moony,” Peter scowled. “You ought to know better than anyone, there aren’t a lot of options here at school. And even if there were, no one’s beating down *my* door asking for a date.”

His words broke Remus’ heart. “That doesn’t mean you deserve any less, love,” Remus said gently. “It just means you — *we* — we’re two fish in a very small pond right now. There’s a whole ocean out there, and you’ll be out in it soon enough. Just because this... man... is the first shark to swim your way, doesn’t mean he’s the best you can do.”

Peter flinched, visibly angry and hurt. “How do you know he’s not what I deserve? You don’t even know him.”

Maybe because he’s the sort of man that hangs around school grounds and lures students into clandestine meetings? Remus, however, had already come dangerously close to breaking his cardinal rule for arguing with teenagers: never forbid outright. Remus sensed that his disapproval would only drive poor Peter to greater secrecy, might even fuel some self-righteous delusion that he was in *love*. (*God, I hope Teddy will have a better head on his shoulders when he gets to be this age.*) “Perhaps you’re right,” Remus conceded disingenuously. “But like I said, it’s my job as your friend to look out for you. And if he hurts you, I’ll make him regret it,” he added, surprising himself with his own conviction.

Peter relaxed, smiling. “Obviously. Isn’t that the whole point of having a clever bisexual werewolf with a talent for hexes as my best friend?”

“Damn right it is.” Remus didn’t want to let it go, but he sensed he had already pushed too much for one night. He wanted Peter to trust him. They could battle it out another day, the sooner the better.

“Erm.” Peter turned pink and shy again. “You won’t tell James or Sirius, will you?”

“No, Peter, I’m not going to out you.”

Peter sighed with relief. “Thanks. I mean, it’s not like I want — I don’t like keeping secrets from them, it’s just — ”

“It’s your secret to tell, when you’re ready,” Remus assured him.

“Thank you, Remus. You really are a solid friend.”

Remus smiled sadly in response.

I don’t like keeping secrets from them... the words echoed over and over in Remus’ mind as he fitfully attempted to fall asleep. *You’re a solid friend. My best friend...* Remus put his pillow over his head. He wanted to scream. Stupid, foolish little Wormtail. How could he be so naïve? How could he trust someone like —

— like Remus himself? *It’s different*, he whispered to himself, even as his inner voice added, *you fucking pervert*. But it *was* different! Severus wasn’t actually a teenager. He was the same age as Remus. *But you didn’t know that when you kissed him, did you?* — *Shut up Voice, shut up, shut up...* He launched himself out of bed and ran to the loo, but he didn’t quite make it to the toilet before collapsing and retching on the floor. He sobbed, continuing to heave well after he had emptied the contents of his stomach.

When he finally looked up, Myrtle was lingering above him, gazing down with sympathy writ across her face. “How can you stand it?” Remus gasped out. “How can you stand to be a child forever? Don’t you feel trapped?”

Myrtle knitted her brows together. “How can *you* stand it? I’ve seen what it’s like to grow up, Remus Lupin.” She gave him a pointed look. “And I say no, thank you very much, to all of that.”

No Exit

“Did you ever forget?”

“What?” Severus looked up from his notes.

“Did you ever just... forget? About who you were?” Remus repeated, lowering his voice, although they were sitting in a deserted section of the library.

“*Forget?* Like amnesia?”

“Not exactly.” Remus grew warm, realising that Severus had no idea what he was on about. Perspiration began to itch at the nape of his neck. “It’s just, I forgot for a while. I thought I really was sixteen. It lasted a few months. Then I remembered.”

Severus looked astonished. “No. I’ve never forgotten for a single moment.” He started flipping through his notebook almost frantically. “I haven’t seen anything like that in the literature. Do you think it was part of the enchantment that brought us here? Why would it affect you, and not me?”

“No — Severus, will you be still for a moment? I don’t think it was caused by magic.”

Severus’ brow furrowed. “What, then?”

“I think it was just... too much. Too much for me to process.” Remus was uncomfortably sweaty now. “It sounds stupid when I say it out loud, I know.”

“No, it sounds like a defence mechanism. What’s intriguing is how quickly you recovered all your memories,” Severus said. “You did, didn’t you?”

“I think so,” Remus said. “I’m not sure I ever really lost them. It was more like... I convinced myself that everything that came after 1976 was just a dream. Sometimes things would come back to me, but it was always hazy, like an itch you go to scratch but you can’t quite find the spot. Every time I thought about something from my past — err, the future, I mean — I wanted to shout until I drowned it out.”

“Like an altered memory in a pensieve,” Severus said, as if to himself.

“Maybe,” Remus said. “I couldn’t speak to that.” He chewed his lip. “I think, in some way, I needed to reset. I needed to relearn how to live in the present. I needed to relearn how to *live*, full

stop.”

“It’s a shame I can’t cast *Legilimens* on you. I’d be very interested to know what that was like,” Severus mused.

“Cheers. You know I love being your guinea pig.”

Severus seemed lost in thought for a moment. Remus now recognised this as his problem-solving face. “Is there any chance you obliterated yourself?”

“If I did, I don’t remember,” Remus replied.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Lupin, are you telling me you don’t know how to recognise the signs of memory modification?”

Remus crossed his arms. “First off, if the caster is actually competent, *like myself*, there are no signs. Second, it was a joke.”

Severus gave Remus an odd look. “I know,” he said. “Mine was a joke too.”

“Oh.” Remus was brought up short. He’d begun to notice that Severus’ ‘jokes’ sounded an awful lot like his regular manner of speaking. “Which part was the joke?” Remus asked, just for clarification.

“I don’t think you’re incompetent. Obviously,” Severus said, still looking at Remus as if he were... well, incompetent.

“I wouldn’t say that’s obvious,” Remus replied, a bit unsettled.

“Why not? You’re the one that got O’s on all your O.W.L.s,” Severus said, as if that explained everything. Smirking, he added, “Once you had the opportunity to cheat, that is.”

“All right, see, that one sounded more like a joke, except that it’s only the truth.”

Severus raised his eyebrows. “Don’t be such a Gryffindor. You didn’t *actually* cheat on your exams. That would imply intention. You can’t help it if you’re marginally more skilled than the average fifth-year student.”

“Marginally.” This time Remus actually chuckled. Severus looked rather self-satisfied. “In my defence, that was during my forgetting phase. I didn’t *know* I’d already sat the same exams once before.”

“Count yourself lucky. They weren’t any more pleasurable the second time.”

“In any case, written exams are no measure of competence or intelligence. But I don’t think we ought to get into pedagogical philosophies right now; I imagine we’d find ourselves rather at odds.”

“Rather,” Severus said, still smirking. “Although I agree with you about written exams. Bloody waste of time and energy for everyone involved.”

“Oh. Good then,” Remus said, still feeling somewhat at sea. “I’m curious, if you’ll indulge me. How did you account for my, erm, academic improvement, when you thought I was just a normal teenager?”

“You’ve never been a normal anything, Lupin,” Snape said. That hurt a bit, but Remus shook it off.

"I was surprised. My best guess was that without the extra... distraction of what should have occurred in our fifth year, you were more able to focus on your studies. I'll admit, I was annoyed when I thought I'd underestimated you *that* severely. It was a relief to find out that you *hadn't* actually been some kind of tragically stifled wunderkind all along."

"I might have been. You'll never know," Remus said with a smile. Then his smile fell. "I pretty much assumed the same about you. That any changes I noticed were because you hadn't been tra — " He shook his head aggressively. "Sorry. Passive voice. Bad habit. I mean, because I hadn't traumatised you that night in the Shrieking Shack." It never got any easier to say it out loud. Still, he owed it to Severus to name what he had done.

"I was not *traumatised*," Severus snapped with a venom that Remus was unprepared for. Remus suppressed his reflex to physically cringe away.

"My mistake," Remus said evenly. He knew it would do no good to argue the point; not in that moment. "I was."

Severus stared at Remus, not with his typical sardonic incredulity, but as if Remus' words were entirely incomprehensible to him. Remus had a strong suspicion that Severus was attempting legilimency on him again. He squirmed in his seat. "Anyway. We should get back to our research." *Nice. Smooth transition, Lupin. Well done.*

Severus rested his chin against his fist and looked down at the table. Remus couldn't have been more relieved to see him revert to his familiar scowl. "The problem is, Lupin, I don't think it matters *how* much reading you or I have done on the subject. We've been tiptoeing around the erumpet in the room. None of these texts address anything like the situation we find ourselves in. Nearly two years of research, and I haven't even a footnote to go off."

"I haven't found anything, either," Remus said uneasily, fighting back the bile that was rising within him. "I'd hoped I could just chalk it up to my own lack of diligence."

"You may have been lacking in diligence, but I have not. There's no record of time travel working this way. Not in this library, anyway. And yes, before you ask, I've done a thorough sweep of the Restricted Section."

"I never doubted it," Remus said. "Just to be sure you and I are on the same page, you're referring to the way we've... inhabited our younger bodies, yes?"

"'Inhabited.' I suppose that's apt."

"Like a vengeful spirit," Remus said. He meant it lightly, but the thought still gave him the shivers.

"If you like. No, Lupin, in all my research, I have not uncovered a single instance of transtemporal magic in which the mind was separated from the body. So to speak."

"Yes. Usually when people travel through time, they take their bodies with them. That's why there's such a serious risk of travellers running into themselves."

"Not 'usually.' *Always*, if we're to believe the literature. And yet in our case, there are no younger versions of ourselves to run into. We've merged, somehow."

"There have been cases," Remus said, "where people woke up as their 'younger selves' in their older bodies, but in all of those cases..."

"...those were highly sophisticated memory charms, not true time travel," Severus concluded for

him.

“Right. Could this be the reverse of that?” Remus asked.

“The reverse...? You’ll have to explain what you mean by that.”

Remus sighed. “I’ve no idea. I was hoping if I said it out loud, maybe it would make sense.”

“If it is an enchantment, it’s not like any I’ve ever encountered,” Severus said, clearly chagrined to admit it. “I can’t even guess what the mechanics are. Have our metaphysical essences literally jumped back in time? Is this a parallel plane of existence? Or is this world actually a sort of construct, an illusion built around us?”

“As long as we don’t know how we got here, we’re unlikely to find a way back again,” Remus said, stating the obvious.

“If there is a future to get back to,” Severus said. Grim. “Perhaps we were both struck with elaborate visions of a possible future on the same night in 1976. Perhaps what we *think* we remember about the future was actually a series of dreams, or hallucinations. Then again, perhaps we’re only dreaming right now.”

“You know, that has crossed my mind. But the fact that your memories line up with mine does rather complicate the theory that this is all in my head.”

“Unless you’re a figment of my imagination,” Severus said, sounding rather hopeful.

“How do you know *you’re* not the figment?” Remus shot back petulantly.

“Because that’s preposterous. I’m not a figment. You don’t have the capacity to imagine someone like me.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let’s make it a term of our truce that we shall treat one another as sentient human beings with thoughts and feelings until further notice.”

“Why? We never did before.”

Remus groaned and lowered his face into his hands. He dug the heels of his palms into his eye sockets and rubbed until green and violet nebulae bloomed behind his lids. After taking a moment to compose himself, he raised his head and spoke. “I think it’s fair to say that between you and I, we have a decent breadth of knowledge about Dark magic. If we were dealing with anything remotely recognisable, I’m confident we would have figured it out by now.”

“We don’t know that it’s Dark magic,” Severus pointed out.

“True,” Remus said with a shudder, “but in my experience, most magic that inflicts psychological torment tends to fall into that category.”

Severus looked up sharply. “Psychological torment? Is that what you would call this?”

“Would I?” Remus repeated, more forcefully than he intended. “Being trapped in a situation I don’t understand and can see no way out of, separated from the person I love most in the world, forced to make impossible decisions that will lead to death no matter what I do; wishing all the time that I could just *forget* but knowing I can’t let myself — yes, I’d file all of that under ‘psychological torment.’” He inhaled deeply, trying to catch his breath.

Severus was quiet for a moment. “Yes,” he said at last. “I suppose you wouldn’t be accustomed to those things.” Remus did not miss his inflection on the word *you*. It tore straight through his heart.

“No one should ever have to grow accustomed to those things, Severus,” Remus whispered, not trusting his voice to remain steady.

Severus, however, was looking over Remus’ shoulder. “Put your books away. Lily’s coming. Oh, for God’s sake, Lupin, can’t you be more subtle about it?”

Lily drew closer. Remus turned to say hello and saw that she was cringing. Severus ended the *Muffliato* he had cast over their table, and her cringe subsided. “I hate that spell,” Lily said, pulling out a chair for herself.

“You said it was ‘brilliant,’” Severus retorted.

“Yeah, it is, when I’m the one using it. So, what kind of top-secret meeting am I interrupting?”

“Just gossiping about you,” Remus said breezily, trying to mask the emotion that had threatened to overtake him just moments before. “We can carry on later, though.”

“Oh, is that all?” Lily grinned as she settled in. “You’re not trying to purloin my Potions partner, are you, Sev? Because that’s not on.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Severus said disdainfully. “He’s entirely your problem now.” Lily sniggered while Remus pretended to pout.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Lily said. “Remus and I are going to ace this project; we don’t need you backseat driving.” Now it was Severus’ turn to look put out. If Lily had cut a little too close to the quick, he hid it well. “What are you grinning about, Remus?”

“I was just picturing how James would react to that idiom. He’d probably take it as a literal fact about cars. I love it when he does that... Never mind,” Remus concluded lamely, realising that he was still on the brink of becoming sentimental. It made Lily laugh, though.

“I should go,” Severus said, using his legs to push his chair back from the table.

“Hold on, not so fast,” Lily said. “While I have you both here, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

Remus’ heart began to pound. It was *never* good news when someone prefaced their words with ‘we should talk.’ Severus dragged his chair forward again with a huff. “Yes?” he asked gruffly, but Remus thought he looked nervous too.

“I wanted to ask if either of you know anything about Alcibiades Greengrass,” Lily said. “He’s in Slytherin. Second year.”

This was not at all what Remus had been expecting. Fortunately he stopped himself from gasping ‘Scuffles?!’ and instead said, “I worked with him in Transfiguration last year. He’s Agnes’ brother, isn’t he?” Agnes Greengrass had been Head Girl when Lily and Remus became prefects.

“That’s right. And his brother Aristocles was Head Boy when we were firsties.”

“Yes,” Severus said, “the Greengrasses have produced a whole lineage of law-abiding do-gooders. Ambitious, though.” Remus tried to remember the Greengrass siblings he had taught at Hogwarts, but he could barely recall anything about them. They must have been well-behaved, then. “You can

imagine how popular they are amongst their fellow Slytherins,” Severus added drily.

Lily turned toward him. “That’s sort of what I wanted to ask you about,” she said. She fidgeted. “Remus, I knew you’d worked with Alcibiades, and Severus, he’s in your House. Did either of you ever notice anything... off about him?”

Off? Remus had noticed quite a lot was *off* about the boy, but he couldn’t very well tell Lily what had happened with Greengrass back in sixth year. “What are you asking us, Lily?” Remus asked cautiously.

Lily sighed. “Fine. I guess I should just come out with it.” She cast *Muffliato*. Severus raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment. “I got a letter from Agnes last week. I think she was asking me to look out for her little brother, without saying it in so many words. Said she was concerned about some of the conversations they had over winter hols.” Lily chewed her lip.

“Concerned, how?” Remus prompted gently.

“Oh. You know. The usual rubbish. Purebloods, family honour, *dirty mudbloods*...” Remus gasped before he could stop himself. Lily ignored him, looking to Severus, but Severus’ face was impassive.

“That is concerning. I know they’re an old pureblood family, but Agnes never seemed the type,” Remus said.

“She’s not. Neither is Aristocles, or their parents, if what she says is true.”

Again, Lily looked to Severus. This time, he seemed to catch on that she expected a response. He cleared his throat. “Well, as for the youngest Greengrass, I’ve not spent enough time in his presence to have any inkling of his views.” Remus wondered if that was true. Severus, for obvious reasons, was reluctant to reveal how much he actually knew about Voldemort’s future followers.

“I see,” Lily said, a little dejected.

“He’s rather quiet,” Remus said, which was more or less true. “All I’ve noticed is that he seems to hero-worship Regulus Black. That, or he’s terrified of him. It’s hard to say, but he watches Regulus like a puppy at heel.”

“Terror and hero-worship tend to go hand-in-hand in Slytherin,” Severus said. Another unfunny joke.

“That figures,” Lily said, frowning. “We all know how outspoken Regulus is about his views. Unless, of course, it suits him better not to be.”

“You know, you sound an awful lot like Sirius right now,” Remus said. Both Lily and Severus looked appalled.

“Like I said, I should go,” Severus reiterated, gathering his remaining things.

“Yeah,” Lily said distractedly. “Just, do you think you could keep an eye on Greengrass when you’re down in the dungeons? His family’s really worried, and I like Agnes. If he were my little brother, I’d want to know someone was watching out for him.”

Severus’ face was a closed book. “I’ll see if I overhear anything,” he said. It was as good a non-answer as any.

“Is he always that abrupt?” Remus asked as Severus walked away. “No ‘I have work to do’ or ‘I’m tired’ or even ‘this conversation is boring me?’ Just a mysterious ‘I should go?’”

“No, not always,” Lily said with a cheeky smile. “Sometimes he just gets up and wanders off without saying anything. I think he was being polite for your sake.”

“Well, then, I’m flattered,” Remus said, not entirely in jest. Then he lowered his voice, although the spell was still in place around them. “James told me something a while back — that you were concerned about students being recruited as Death Eaters right here at school. I assume you’ve already talked to him about Greengrass.”

“Yeah,” Lily said, looking troubled again. “I just can’t stand the thought of it, these little kids throwing their whole lives away for the likes of... well, you know.”

“I know,” Remus said. They’d had conversations like this before, the first time around, but they’d never taken action whilst they were still in school. Later, Lily would come to excel at countering pureblood-supremacist propaganda. (She’d always been a skilled debater. Remus remembered, with a pang, that she’d just begun researching law degrees when she —) But what of the present? Severus would be furious if he knew that Remus was even considering scheming with Lily on this.

“I used to think creeps like Mulciber and Avery were the dangerous ones,” Lily continued, “but at least they wear their hatred out in the open. Regulus is far too clever. He’s figured out how to be *charming*. He’s got all the younger Slytherins eating out of his hand. I’ve heard he’s angling for Head Boy next year. Just *think* of the damage he could do then.”

“Yes,” Remus said with a shiver. Privately, he wondered if Regulus was as much of a zealot as everyone seemed to believe. In fact, Remus had been agonising over that question since the day Regulus had shown him his Mark. Regulus had proselytised with the fervour of a convert. And yet, in the end — well, no one truly knew what had befallen Regulus in the end, but his allegiance to his Dark Lord had not served him well. Another puzzle to which Remus held only a few paltry pieces. “Have you talked to anyone besides James about this?”

“Yes,” Lily said, “you and Severus. Why?”

“I think... if you’re going to plan anything proactive, I think Sirius would like to help. And I think he would be an asset.”

Lily scoffed. “Sirius Black has about as much subtlety as a herd of hippogriffs in heat. His idea of a persuasive argument is to hex someone’s mouth shut. And he’s so prejudiced against Slytherins, he’d sooner hand the lot of them over to You-Know-Who and be done with it than lift a finger to help them.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. He doesn’t hate Slytherins half as much as he hates Voldemort. He’ll swallow his pride if it means preventing another kid from getting mixed up with the Death Eaters.”

“You know him better than I do,” Lily said doubtfully, “but all the same, I can’t see him cooperating.”

“He will, for exactly the same reason you gave earlier. If it were your little brother in trouble, you’d want someone watching out for him, helping him make the right choices...” Remus wrung his fingers, wondering if he should be saying any of this out loud, when he’d never actually spoken to Sirius about it.

“It’s not the same at all. Sirius *hates* Regulus. Everyone knows that. He doesn’t exactly hide how

he feels.”

Remus hummed sympathetically. “I think Sirius *hates* Regulus about as much as you hate your own sister.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Anger flashed across Lily’s face. “Don’t you dare compare the two. Petunia’s a twit, but she’s not rotten to the core like Mr. Junior Death Eater of the Year 1978.”

Not rotten to the core... Remus wished immediately that he hadn’t raised the spectre of Harry’s Aunt Petunia. He would never speak to Lily of her sister’s burgeoning talent for cruelty; not merely because it would break linear time, but because it would break Lily’s heart. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to imply...” Remus didn’t trust himself to finish that sentence. In fact, he would quite happily imply any number of nasty things about Petunia Evans. “I just meant to say that Sirius’ feelings aren’t as straightforward as he likes to pretend. I think he carries a lot of guilt. He was too late for Regulus, but if he could help protect other children from going down the same path...”

“Maybe,” Lily said, her harsh expression faltering. “Look, I know Black — Sirius — isn’t all bad, but he’s difficult to like.”

That sparked an idea. Remus sat up a little straighter. “For you, maybe,” he said, a smile forming on his lips. “Fortunately, there are plenty of people who’d disagree.”

“What are you thinking?” Lily asked sceptically.

“I’m thinking that our side has a pretty solid counterweight to Regulus’ *charm*.”

Lily arched a brow. “Are you really suggesting that we send Sirius Black to persuade Slytherin students away from Voldemort? Why not just drop an anvil on their heads? It’ll be faster, and just as delicate.”

“Not at all,” Remus said. “He doesn’t have to *try* to convince anyone of anything. He just has to —” Remus gesticulated vaguely “— do his thing. Make people like him. Make people like him *more than Regulus*.”

“So, just to be clear, your strategy for rooting out Death Eaters at Hogwarts is to have Sirius Black usurp his brother’s fan club?”

“It’s a step,” Remus shrugged. “I guarantee you Sirius would be up for it, especially if you put it that way. Better yet, frame it as a competition and he’ll be on it faster than you can say *wingardium leviosa*.”

Lily mulled it over. “Well, it isn’t the worst idea. A bit of social lubricant never hurts. I suppose the Slytherins will feel a bit warmer to our cause if we don’t just approach them as a bunch of Gryffindor prefects telling them what to do.” She sighed. “I’d sort of hoped that’s where Severus would come in, but I understand why he doesn’t want to piss off his Housemates. Really, I do. I try.” *You don’t understand the half of it*, Remus thought sadly.

“I wouldn’t be too put out about that. I don’t think the words ‘Severus’ and ‘social lubricant’ even belong on the same page, unless that’s a new potion he’s developing.” Remus hoped that Lily would take his words as he meant them: affectionately. “The Death Eaters are all about peer pressure. They’ve started targeting kids because they’re young and impressionable. Well, they’re about to meet their match. Sirius Black is the coolest kid in school.”

Lily laughed. “Who are you right now? You sound about sixty years old.”

"Please, Lily, I sound forty at most," Remus said, grinning back at her. "You know I'm right. Voldemort doesn't wear leather jackets or ride a motorcycle."

Lily snorted, then covered her mouth. "Fine. But I'm leaving it up to you and James to talk to Sirius."

"Mmhhh. Don't you worry. Give Sirius a chance to undermine Voldemort *and* poke Regulus in the eye while he's at it, and he'll be over the moon."

"Oh! Speaking of which, that reminds me," Lily said. She reached for the books she'd dropped on the table when she arrived. "I actually did want to chat about our Potions project, if you have the time."

"I have nothing but time," Remus said, relieved to change the subject.

"Great. I've been going through the list of ingredients over and over — just the process of gathering supplies is absurdly time-consuming, let alone actually brewing the potion. And the book claims the mixture won't keep; you have to repeat the process every month. No wonder I've never heard of anyone actually using it, even though I know plenty of people it could benefit. You would think that potions formulated for people who menstruate would be standard issue at the infirmary, but I've never gotten anything like that. Just a pain potion here, an anti-emetic there, the occasional invigoration potion so I wouldn't miss class..."

"So, treating the symptoms, and not the cause," Remus responded.

"Exactly." Lily traced her finger down the list of ingredients. They had already determined that they could obtain everything at Hogwarts, although it had put them in the mortifying position of having to ask Professor Sprout if she would extract the bubotuber pus for them; the instructions stated, inexplicably, that it must be collected by a postmenopausal woman. ("Just how old do you think I am?" Pomona had asked sternly, and then, just as Remus and Lily began to wither under her gaze, she had broken into gales of laughter and told them that of *course* she would be happy to assist with their project.) "This says the tansy must be harvested by the light of the full moon, but it doesn't give any good reason why. I think we should make two variants on the original recipe, one with full-moon tansy and one with regular old daytime tansy."

"I agree," Remus said, trying to ignore the clammy feeling in his palms.

"Of course, it would be much better if we had more test subjects. Or a longer period of time for trials. But at least it'll be a good jumping-off point. Next full moon's in a week, so we can get started fairly soon. I think I should try the by-the-books recipe first as a control, and try the variant in a cycle or two to compare."

"That all makes sense to me," Remus said. "Erm." He shifted restlessly his seat. "The thing is, Lily, I might not be able to help you with the harvesting. If that's all right."

"Oh?" Lily went very still. Remus met her eyes, and in an instant, he was convinced that she *knew*.

Remus wished he could leave it at that, a quiet insinuation, but Lily deserved to hear the truth from him. He wasn't sure what drove him to bring it up at that moment, except that the conversation provided an elegant segue. Lily had accepted his lycanthropy once before; she would accept him again. "No," he said, forcing himself to maintain eye contact, "actually, I shouldn't have said *might not*, because I flat-out can't. See, Lily, the thing is, I'm a werewolf, and werewolves aren't very good at harvesting flowers, generally speaking." He quirked a smile, then curled his fingers into claws and pantomimed digging to signify 'no opposable thumbs.'

Lily smiled back, but it didn't reach her eyes. If anything, she looked glazed-over, as if she might cry. *Damn it.* Remus didn't know what to do with that. "That's not a problem," Lily said with just the slightest quaver in her voice. Remus felt all of the unspoken implications behind her words. "I can do that part myself."

"Thanks, Lily," Remus said warmly. All he wanted was to banish the tears from Lily's eyes. "I, erm, I wasn't sure if James had told you already." Not that James had told her before, at least as far as Remus knew, but it was still a possibility.

"What?" Lily's expression of surprise melted into tenderness as she spoke. "No, God bless him, he didn't. He never so much as hinted at it."

"Good man. But you did know, didn't you?" Remus asked, though it wasn't really a question. "You're not surprised."

"No," Lily said. "Well, I didn't *know* exactly, but... Severus used to say he suspected... but I shouldn't be telling you this. It's in the past."

"You've discussed me — my — this, with Severus?" Remus asked.

"Back when he used to... well, it's been years since he's brought it up, really. He told me he had suspicions about you, but he dropped it after a while."

"Ah." It made sense, when Remus thought about it. "Well, that's all right. Severus knows, too."

"You *told* him?" Lily gasped.

"Not really. He worked it out on his own. Just like you said."

"How long has *he* known?" Lily asked. She still seemed quite shaken.

"You'd have to ask him," Remus replied. An obvious deflection, but Remus trusted Severus to come up with a better impromptu answer than he could.

"Right." Lily was carving idle patterns into the waxed tabletop with her thumbnail. It was a nervous habit Remus had never noticed before; or perhaps he'd simply never seen Lily nervous before. "That's a huge relief, actually. I'm glad to know Sev's fully lost interest in trying to get you sent down."

"Mm. Sounds like he made a real hobby out of it, for a while."

"Sure, well, everyone needs hobbies. I suggested he try needlepoint, but he never took to it like he did with the blackmailing." Finally, Lily was smiling again. Remus felt like he'd broken through the other end of a passing storm.

"He's an odd duck, that Severus Snape," Remus said, mirroring Lily's smile. "He's growing on me, though."

"And you, Remus Lupin, are a master of understatement. Let's get back to work, shall we?"

They returned to their research plan, trying to work out how many variations on the Inconstant Moon Potion they could realistically produce before the end of the school term. Lily suggested that if all went well, they could continue their trials after graduation; Remus gave a noncommittal response.

They were silent for a few minutes as Lily meticulously wrote out their research plan. All of a sudden, she stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked up at him. Ink began to pool at the nib of her quill, expanding across the parchment. “Thank you, Remus,” she said in a raw voice.

“What for?” Remus asked.

“For trusting me.”

Remus reached across the table and squeezed the hand not holding her quill in both of his. “You make it easy, Lily.”

There was just one thing nagging at Remus’ conscience. As he and Lily got up to leave the library, Remus said, “There’s something you should know. Greengrass, he doesn’t like me very much. Nothing serious, he was just a bit of a brat in Transfiguration lessons last year. But it’s probably better if I stay out of his way. Too much ill will. It won’t help our cause.” There. He had recused himself from the situation. Another successful non-decision.

Remus knew that staying out of it was the right thing to do. Why, then, did it leave such a bitter taste in his mouth?

Past Tense

“What is *wrong* with you, Prongs? It’s the day before Valentine’s, and you haven’t even got a *card*?”

Remus was only half-listening as Sirius berated James. He was hunched over the Marauder’s Map, sketching out some of the finer details of the outer grounds with a fountain pen. He really hadn’t given much thought to the fact that he would have to do this work a *second* time, but it had become increasingly apparent that if he didn’t finish the Map, no one would. He drew a few flourishes that were meant to approximate pumpkin vines around Hagrid’s hut.

“She told me she hates Valentine’s Day,” James said defensively. “Told me about a hundred times, in fact.”

“This is your first Valentine’s Day as a couple,” Sirius explained patiently. “This is going to set the tone for every Valentine’s Day for the rest of your lives. And you couldn’t even be arsed to get her a bloody card?!”

“I’m setting the tone by respecting my girlfriend’s wishes, thank you very much.”

“Yeah, but what about *your* wishes?” Peter asked. “You *love* that kind of... you know... mushy, saccharine stuff.”

“Exactly!” Sirius agreed.

“You just don’t understand, because none of you have girlfriends,” James said haughtily. (At this point, it was more a self-referential joke than anything when he said that.) “I’m not going to pester Lily with sweets and flowers she doesn’t even want.”

“First of all, everyone wants sweets, on all occasions,” Peter said. “And second, do you really think she’s going to be cross if you give her a card?”

“Hear, hear!” Sirius cried. “So she doesn’t go in for the commercialism and all that. That doesn’t mean she won’t appreciate a little message from the heart. In fact, since she *knows* you love crap like this, she’ll be positively expecting something. Honestly, Prongs.”

“Do you think?” James asked, a little less sure of himself.

“Yes,” Sirius and Peter chorused.

“What do you think, Moony?” James pressed.

“Get her a card,” Remus said. “But don’t buy it. Make it.” Without looking up from his work, he pointed and swished his wrist, floating a box containing multicoloured inks and the leftover paper from his holiday card-making over to James’ corner of the room.

“God, Moony, do you have to be such a fucking show-off all the time?” James asked good-naturedly.

“What?” Remus *did* look up at that.

“Right?” Sirius responded. “We get it. You’re good at wandless magic. Bully for you.”

Remus knew they were only teasing him, but he felt a bit dizzy nevertheless. Damn it. He *really*

needed to be more careful about that sort of thing. “Sorry. Didn’t realise I was doing it,” he said.

James rolled his eyes. “Case in point. Spoken like a show-off.” Remus smiled sheepishly.

As Remus added an extra curlicue to the ‘G’ in ‘Greenhouses,’ a figure appeared almost directly beneath his pen. He rubbed at his eyes and feigned a yawn. “I can’t look at this any longer. *Mischief Managed*. I’m going out for a run,” he announced abruptly. He stood up and hurriedly tied on his trainers.

“In bluejeans?” James asked, bemused.

“Err... yes,” Remus replied, darting out the door before anyone could see the flush rising to his cheeks.

As soon as he got outside and felt the rain, Remus regretted his decision not to change clothes, but it was too late now. He pulled his hands into the sleeves of his anorak and shivered as the wind plastered his wet jeans to his thighs. He hoped he would have a chance to warm up in the greenhouse, but no such luck. He ran into Severus, who was wearing a sensible weatherproof cloak, already on his way back to the castle from the greenhouses. Remus called out to him.

“Lupin. What are you doing out here?” Severus cast a judgmental glance toward Remus’ saturated jeans and muddy trainers.

“Looking for you. Actually, I was hoping to catch you while you were still in the greenhouse.”

Severus scowled. He’d made it clear that he *really* didn’t like it when Remus used the Map to track him down, but Remus couldn’t help that it was so convenient. (Well, technically speaking, as its creator, he *could* help it; but that was beside the point.) Remus only felt a little bit guilty about doing it.

“Can we maybe go inside?” Remus added, wrapping his arms tighter around himself.

“I’m not stopping you,” Severus said, continuing on toward the castle.

“Oh. I actually meant in the — all right, then, never mind.” Remus turned to catch up with him. “Severus, I’ve been waiting for a chance to ask you. You know that conversation we had with Lily a few weeks back, about that second-year, Greengrass? Do you know anything? I mean, do you know what’s going to happen to him?”

Severus halted. “This is a conversation that calls for absolute privacy,” he admonished.

“Yeah, that’s sort of why I waited until you were alone to bring it up,” Remus said irritably.

“Very well.” Severus pivoted and changed course, although he was not headed back toward the greenhouses. Remus realised with dejection that Severus was going to make him do a lap around the grounds with him. He was fairly sure that he was being punished for popping up unannounced. “I meant what I said to Lily,” Severus continued. “I don’t know anything about the boy, now or in the future.”

“Really? So he didn’t join the Death Eaters, after all?”

“I don’t know,” Severus repeated.

“How can you possibly not know?”

“Believe it or not, the Dark Lord didn’t hand out telephone directories for his followers. I don’t recall any Greengrass taking part in the Second War, but it’s possible that he was involved in the First War, when I was... less informed. I have no way of knowing.”

“I see,” Remus said. “That makes sense. I just assumed you knew everything.” He was halfway between teasing and sincere, and Severus seemed halfway between annoyed and pleased. “So, even if we *did* agree to help Lily, we’d be going in blind, since we don’t know what happened to Greengrass in our timeline, either.”

“Yes. It’s an interesting dilemma,” Severus said. Remus shivered, from both the cold and from the impersonality of the word *interesting*. “Neither of us will act on it, of course,” Severus said pointedly.

“Of course,” Remus agreed. “I already told Lily I can’t help her. I told her Greengrass doesn’t like me, which is perfectly true.” He declined to mention all of the advice he’d offered up to Lily *before* he’d recused himself.

“Why? I thought all your little first-years were enamoured with you. What did you do to him?”

“Oh, don’t you remember? He was one of the children who threatened to expose me,” Remus said, quite casually.

“Expose you?” Severus frowned. “Was that — are you talking about what happened last spring, when you went off on me in the Potions room?”

“Yes. Why are you still being coy about it? Greengrass was one of the students that wrote the, erm, leaflet, or whatever it was, accusing me of being a werewolf.”

“Coy?” Severus repeated in astonishment, and then, “Leaflet?”

“Yes,” Remus said, less confidently. “Didn’t you read it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh. I just assumed you had intercepted it. If you didn’t see the leaflet, how did you know to tip Regulus off about them?”

Severus froze in his tracks. “Regulus Black? What does *he* have to do with any of this?”

Remus’ mind was racing. “Well, Regulus tracked them down and punished them before they could go through with their plan. But — weren’t you the one that put him on their scent?”

Severus looked horrified. “Why on earth would I tell *Regulus Black* that you’re a werewolf?”

It did sound absurd, when he put it in those terms. Remus felt faint. If Severus had had nothing to do with it, that meant Regulus had intercepted the leaflet and acted of his own accord. Why was Remus surprised? Of course Regulus kept close tabs on the students in his House. Regulus was nothing if not fastidious in his prefect duties; and he had another motivation, besides, as Remus well knew.

Before Remus could gather himself to speak, Severus had another outburst, as if the information was hitting him in waves. “*Regulus Black knows you’re a werewolf?!?*”

“Erm. Yeah, seems that way.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Severus yelled, exasperated. He was breathing awfully quickly. Remus was beginning to feel concerned for him.

“Well, you know, at the time I thought...”

“Why hasn’t *he* told anyone?” Severus interrupted.

“I think you can work that one out for yourself,” Remus said, looking at Severus expectantly.

“Is he blackmailing you?” Severus demanded.

“Not yet, though he probably intends to keep that option open...”

Severus stared at him for a long moment, still panting. He looked like he was fighting for self-control. “Are you telling me that Black wants to recruit you?” he asked in a low, steady voice.

“Yes. That was my impression.”

“Just an impression? Or did he say something explicit?”

Remus shifted on his feet. He felt like he was being interrogated. “He showed me his Mark. I’d say that’s pretty explicit.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me any of this?!”

“Well... no. I thought you knew. I guess.”

“Why would I know? Did this happen in the first timeline?”

“No.”

“You haven’t told anyone else, have you?”

“Of course not!”

“Good to know you still have *some* small shred of sense.” Severus clutched at his head as if in pain. “Dear God, what an *imbecile*!” He peeked at Remus through his fingers. “Not you. Black,” he amended in an undertone.

“Cheers,” Remus said, frowning.

“I knew the man could be reckless, but I didn’t realise he was *stupid*. No wonder he went and got himself killed five minutes after he left school.”

Remus suddenly felt very, very cold. He began moving again, as if a brisk walk might warm him inside as well as out. “Regulus never struck me as the reckless type,” he said.

“Well, perhaps not by Gryffindor standards,” Severus said, keeping pace. “But he always thought he knew better than anyone else. He liked to take matters into his own hands. I’m certain he was *not* acting on the Dark Lord’s orders when he approached you.”

“No, I suppose not. Could that get him into trouble with Vol — erm, you know?”

“Being an enterprising young go-getter might get you Quidditch captain and Head Boy, but it’s not necessarily a quality the Dark Lord looks for in his acolytes.”

Remus stopped again. The cold was creeping up into his throat. "Severus... how much do you know about Regulus' disappearance?"

"No more than you do, most likely."

"Is it true..." Why was his voice failing him now? "Is it true that he defected?"

"That was the rumour," Severus said, shrugging callously. But then, surely it was a painful subject for him, too.

"A rumour? But you don't *know*? How is that possible?" Remus pressed.

"Ah. I suppose you imagine that the Dark Lord liked to make examples of any followers that went astray. But you see, in those early days, that would have required him to admit that there *were* defectors, and that's not something he was keen to do. He was much more inclined to dispose of them quietly. So, no, Remus, I was not privy to that information. I don't know how Regulus Black died."

"Oh," Remus said. "That's very sad." He thought he might be crying, but his face was already so wet from the rain. He looked down at the ground to hide his face. "But do *you* think he would have done it?"

"I barely knew Regulus," Severus said coldly. "If you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly in his good graces. He always thought I was beneath him. As a matter of fact, that was one of the many things he had in common with his elder brother. It's a wonder they didn't get along better, really."

"Fine. You haven't answered my question, though."

Severus paused, as if he were weighing his words very carefully. "From what I observed, Regulus Black was firm in his principles, however wrongheaded they may have been. He was always going on about honour and duty and all that aristocratic claptrap. I had the impression that he viewed himself as a Black first, a Slytherin second, and a Death Eater third."

"I imagine the Dark Lord didn't take very kindly to that."

"No."

"I don't like this. It feels so wrong," Remus murmured, making patterns in the mud with his heels. "Talking about him in the past tense, when he's just on the other side of those walls, as alive as you or I."

"You get used to it," Severus said.

"Let's go back to the castle. I'm freezing." As they trudged back to the entrance, Remus said, "I used to think that knowing the future was the most horrible feeling in the world. Now I'm starting to think that knowing only *part* of it is much, much worse."

Before they went inside, Severus stopped him again. "Do you know about the vanishing room on the seventh floor?" he asked.

"The room... oh! You mean the Come and Go Room?"

Severus waved a hand. "If you will. You know how to get to it, then?"

"Yes," Remus said. "I spent months in there when I was sixteen, trying to work out how to draw it

on our map. It even gave me a drafting table, rulers, compasses, but whatever I drew just disappeared after I'd left the room. I finally gave up after I tried to charm it permanent and it burned a hole through the parchment and caught my sleeve on fire."

"Fascinating," Severus said dismissively. "I just need to know if you can meet me there tomorrow night after supper."

"Oh. Yes, if the room will cooperate, I'll be there."

"Good." Severus nodded, then went off on his way. Remus tried to make a beeline for the Prefects' Bath, but he had the misfortune of running into Peter on the way.

"Hello, Moony! You look like you just crawled out of the lake," Peter said cheerfully.

"Don't tell James," Remus said, blushing. "He tried to make me change into something sensible before I went out. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Can't believe Prongs is the one giving *you* sensible advice, now. What *is* this world coming to, eh?"

Remus privately agreed, but oh, it was *heavenly* to strip out of his wet clothes in the Prefects' Bath. He sat for several minutes letting the steam defrost him before he stepped into the warm water. He cast a drying charm on his clothes before folding them; why hadn't he thought to do that sooner? If anyone asked, he would say that he was distracted and forgot, but deep down he thought he understood the real reason: he'd wanted to be cold and uncomfortable. He was punishing himself. He wanted his exterior to feel worse than his interior. It didn't work.

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, letting the warmth seep into his overburdened shoulders. He was finally beginning to feel relaxed when something occurred to him. He started up, heart pounding.

"Oh, good, you're awake," came a diminutive voice from somewhere behind him.

"Oh, for the love of — were you *watching me sleep*, Myrtle? *What have we talked about?*"

"No," Myrtle objected, sounding offended. "I was watching to make sure you *didn't* fall asleep. You could drown if you're not careful, you know."

She had a point. "Thanks," Remus said grudgingly.

"So, what was it that startled you?" Myrtle asked.

"Hmm? It was nothing, just a thought."

"A thought about what?" She floated closer to him.

"Myrtle, it's really none of your — " He paused mid-sentence. Then again, why shouldn't he confide in her? It wasn't like he could talk to any of his other friends about it. "If I tell you, do you promise not to tell anyone else about it?"

"Cross my — well, you know what I'm trying to say," she said eagerly.

"Okay, well, say it's Valentine's Day..."

"Which it will be, tomorrow."

“Yes. Say it’s Valentine’s Day, and the person you fancy asks you to meet them after supper in an unplottable room...” He was cut off by Myrtle’s squeal of enthusiasm. “...I’m not finished. But say, also, that person utterly loathes the whole concept of Valentine’s Day and would never be caught dead — oh, erm, sorry, figure of speech — I mean he would never be caught doing anything romantic for it... It’s probably just a coincidence, right? I mean, he probably doesn’t even realise what day it is tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Myrtle said, excitedly making figure-eights in the air. “Or *maybe* he’s going to pretend it’s a coincidence, but deep down he asked because he *really* wants you to be his Valentine.”

Suddenly Remus felt embarrassed that he was gossiping with a ghost who was, effectively, still a young girl — and about *Severus*, of all people. “I don’t think that’s the case,” he said. “I just got carried away with my thoughts, for a minute. I don’t much like Valentine’s Day, myself. It’s just another Tuesday. People put far too much pressure on it. Besides, I don’t even know what he wants to meet about. It’s probably just... homework.” He cut himself off, realising that perhaps he was protesting too much.

Myrtle shrugged. “Suit yourself,” she said, still giddy. “Or maybe,” she gasped, “maybe he wants to see you on Valentine’s Day because he’s hoping *you’ll* make the first move.”

“What? No, that’s — no.” That couldn’t be it. Could it? No. *Teenage girl talking, remember?* “I think you — both of us are reading too much into it. This is just my amygdala taking charge for my underdeveloped prefrontal cortex.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Different parts of the brain. It means I’m thinking with my emotions.”

“Well, I don’t even *have* a brain, and *I* know that boys don’t set up secret rendezvous on Valentine’s Day just to do homework.”

“This one does.”

“Sure. Just like he coincidentally *happened* to catch you under the mistletoe on Christmas Day...”

Remus flushed. He was growing uncomfortably itchy in the hot water. “How do you know about that?”

“I *do* get out, you know,” Myrtle said, rolling her eyes. “And you know how the portraits like to gossip. Not me, of course. I know how to keep a secret. I’m always telling them they should mind their own canvasses.”

“Of course,” Remus groaned. “Well, that was completely different. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “But don’t come crying to me if he starts giving you the cold shoulder after you blow it with him.” Then she sank into the opposite end of the bath, instantly lowering the temperature. Remus sighed in relief as his itching went away. “I’m only joking, of course. You can *always* come and cry on *my* cold shoulder, love.”

“Cheers, Myrtle,” Remus said. He slid back down, ducking his head under the water. The anticipation was killing him, and it had only been an hour. How was he going to make it until the next evening?

I (Do/Don't) Want This Forever

Remus looked forward anxiously to Defence Against The Dark Arts in the morning, knowing that Severus would be there too. He expected to spend the entire lesson studying the other man's face, trying to gain any sort of clue as to what was going on. It was not to be, however; Severus was absent from class. If anything, that only made Remus *more* nervous. He wondered if they were still on for that evening. Distracted, Remus spent the whole lecture doodling hearts in the margins of his notes. Inside the hearts, he wrote cute little romantic sayings like '*I don't think you're incompetent,*' '*mistletoe is a useful ingredient,*' and '*your death would be inexpedient (at this time).*'

Sirius approached him after class. "I'm skipping lunch today. Want to come back to the dorms with me?"

"All right," Remus said. If Sirius was asking for company, something must be going on with him. "Where did James and Lily disappear to after class?" Remus asked as they climbed up to Gryffindor Tower.

"Oh, Lily's planned out this whole picnic dinner for him. Very romantic."

"Lily has? Really? I thought she hated Valentine's Day."

"She does, but she knows it means a lot to James, so..." Sirius smiled. One might almost say he looked fond.

"And how did *you* come to find out about this top-secret picnic scheme, hmm?"

"Well, Lily was asking me about what James likes to eat, and all that," Sirius said, looking at the floor in embarrassment. Remus grinned. So, Lily had finally extended an olive branch to Sirius. She really was a class act. He could tell Sirius was chuffed about it, even if he wouldn't admit it.

"Well, I think that's wonderful," Remus said. "James is going to be over the moon."

"And we're going to be hearing about it for the next six months," Sirius groaned.

"Ah, yes. 'You should have *seen* the way Lily sliced the sandwiches! Such precision! What a triumph!'"

"The way she held the spoon — delightful! The very picture of elegance!"

"Oh, how I envied that blessed spoon! Her lips are sweeter than any jam tart, softer than any custard!"

"Oh, Lily! Roll me out on the blanket, spread me and devour me like a hunk of camembert!"

When they returned to the dorm, there was a neat little stack of cards waiting on Sirius' pillow. Every year since they'd started at Hogwarts, the stack had grown incrementally larger. Sirius tossed a box of chocolates over to Remus, then sat down to read the cards. Just as he did every year, he gave each one a polite once-over, then tossed the lot of them into the fire.

"Ouch. Poor girls. That's stone cold, that is," Remus teased him.

Sirius frowned. He pulled out the 'meal' he had squirrelled away from breakfast, which was really

just a few pitiful butter sandwiches on brown bread, and offered one to Remus. "Do you think so?" he asked.

Remus was flummoxed by his earnestness. "What? No, of course not. I was only joking, sorry."

"Thanks for keeping me company. I just really don't want to spend any more time out in the halls than I have to today. All those stupid little hearts and cupids everywhere, and people suddenly acting like it's the end of the world if they don't have a date on Valentine's Day..."

"It's a lot of pressure to put on one day," Remus agreed. "Especially on a Tuesday."

Sirius took a bite of his sandwich and chewed morosely. "But other people say that about me, don't they? That I'm cold? Aloof? That I think I'm too good for Hogwarts girls? I know people talk," he said.

"People always talk," Remus said, "and most of it is utter tripe. No one who's spent more than five minutes around you would ever call you *aloof*."

"Don't you think they have a point though? I mean, look at James and Lily; they're practically engaged already. Meanwhile, I'm eighteen and I've never had a girlfriend. I haven't even kissed anyone since that disaster with Kathleen Brady back in fifth year."

"There's nothing wrong with that, Sirius," Remus said, instantly becoming a forty-year-old professor again. "There's no point in any of us comparing ourselves with James. He's a special case. You, you'll know when you find the right girl, and you'll do it when you're good and ready." Sirius only let out a quiet huff in response. "Or the right boy?" Remus hazarded, when it seemed nothing more was forthcoming. Sirius shook his head in the negative. "Well, in any case, all in good time."

Sirius lay back across his bed with his head hanging off the other side, staring upside-down at the opposite wall. "Yeah, I'm sure you're right. All in good time," he agreed, although his tone and body language conveyed no such thing. Then, after a long moment, he spoke again, in a voice so uncharacteristically small that Remus barely caught it. "Or maybe never?"

Remus' heart sped up. He blocked the inner voice that said, *that's right, it's true, never, not for him*. "Sirius, don't say — "

Sirius cut him off. "I mean, maybe I'll never want to?"

"Oh." Remus blinked rapidly, trying to clear the moisture from his eyes. "That's all right, too," he said, suddenly feeling as if he'd stuck his foot in it and not quite knowing why.

"Is it?" Sirius growled. "Because James won't shut up about how *wonderful* it is to be in love, and how he can't *wait* to be married and live with Lily and make lots and lots of little green-eyed babies with her, and he keeps telling me that one day I'll understand, as if he's not younger than I am."

Remus hummed sympathetically. "You're his closest friend. I think it's hard for him to imagine that you might not want all the same things in life that he does," he said carefully. "James sometimes has a difficult time putting himself in other people's shoes."

"D'you think?" Sirius snorted.

Remus waited patiently to see if Sirius wanted to say anything more. He knew he could be waiting a long time. Even after two years, they still didn't have heart-to-hearts like this very often. And

they had *never* had *this* conversation; not at school, not during the war, and certainly not at Grimmauld Place. Remus felt out of his depth. Had he really known so little about the people he knew best in the world?

“Can I tell you something?” Sirius asked, cutting through Remus’ melancholy reflections.

“Of course. Anything,” Remus said, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically.

“The way I was raised — I mean, before my family gave up on me, when I was still meant to become lord of the manor and so on — my mother always told me how important it would be to find a good wife to run the household for me. Can’t have a house without a housewife to look after it. I know if you *asked* James he would say that’s stupid, but I think he sort of feels the same way, without even realising it. Not that he wants Lily to become a housewife or anything; I just mean he’s never talked about *home* without saying *family* in the same breath. And I want all of that for him, I do. But for me...” Remus watched the arc of Sirius’ stomach rise and fall as he heaved a sigh. “When I moved into the flat, the first night I spent completely alone — the first morning I woke up alone — I just felt *right*. Like I could breathe freely for the first time in my life. Like I was *safe*. And then I made my own breakfast, and sat and ate it by myself while I looked out the window, and I thought, *I want this forever*.” Another sigh, more tortured this time. “I know it sounds mad, but it felt like the way James talks about Lily. Butterflies, warmth, *giggles*, for God’s sake — but not about a person. About my home. My life. When I was on my own, I actually felt excited about the future for the first time *ever*.”

“That doesn’t sound strange to me at all,” Remus said.

“No? I’m pretty sure most people would disagree.”

“Since when have you cared what ‘most people’ think?”

Sirius laughed softly. He sat back up to face Remus, and his expression morphed into alarm so quickly it was almost comical. “Hey there, old boy, what’s all this? What are you crying for?”

“It’s nothing,” Remus said, wiping his eyes. “I’m just... happy,” he lied. “I’m happy for you. I’m happy you trust me enough to talk about these things.”

“That’s all right then,” Sirius said, smiling reassuringly, although his brow was still wrinkled in confusion. “Hey, chin up. I’m the one that should be crying, if anything.” He probably would have given Remus a manly, energetic pat on the back too, if there hadn’t been so much space between them.

“Thanks, Padfoot. I just need a moment to collect myself, all right?” Remus pulled up his legs and waved his hand, slamming the curtains shut around him. In the darkness, he sank back against his pillow. He was haunted by visions of his friend cowering in a dank, salt-encrusted cell, surrounded by dementors day and night. It was a perverse parody of the blissful solitude that Sirius had just described: isolated, friendless, and yet he had been under constant surveillance, never truly alone for a single moment of those twelve long years. Safety, independence, breathing space — all of those precious feelings he had wanted to keep forever had been forever stolen from him.

Remus imagined himself eating chocolate to deal with his imaginary dementors. It wasn’t the most effective strategy, but it would do in a pinch. After a minute, he managed to even out his breathing. In another minute, he was able to plaster a smile back on his face. He opened the curtains again. “So. That was one of the most pathetic ‘sandwiches’ I’ve ever had in my life. Shall we skive off the rest of the day and go raid the kitchens?”

Sirius smiled back. His expression spoke volumes: anxiety, relief, gratitude. “You know, I was just thinking the same thing.” He rummaged around for a moment, then said, “Damn. I forgot, Prongs took the Map so we wouldn’t spy on him and Lily. As if I want to know where those two go to snog.”

“Might be good to find out, actually, just so we can avoid their little love nests in the future.”

“Eugh. Never say those words together in that order again, please. Aha!” Sirius pulled the invisibility cloak from a tangle of James’ dirty laundry. “Never mind, we don’t need the Map.”

“We *are* the Map,” Remus said, tapping his forehead.

“Oh God, that reminds me!” Sirius grinned. “I’ve had the most brilliant idea to charm the Map, to keep it safe from prying eyes...”

After that, the rest of the day was great fun; nearly enough to distract Remus from thoughts of dark, entrancing, prying eyes. However, the time eventually came for him to excuse himself upon the dubious pretext that he was going to the library (for the remaining half-hour before it closed for the evening... *stupid*.) He actually did plan to go to the library for ten minutes, just in case his friends were looking at the Map. He got halfway there before realising what an incredible waste of time that would be, and headed straight to the seventh floor instead.

Remus took a deep breath and strode down the corridor. He stopped at the end, swallowed, pivoted, and walked back the other way. He could still leave. He didn’t have to go through with it. Dread was almost beginning to outweigh his curiosity. Almost. Then Remus thought about how Severus would react if he stood him up. Before he could overthink it, he turned and crossed once more in front of the blank wall. The door materialised before him. Remus took another fortifying breath and pushed it open.

The smell hit him right away; it nearly knocked him off his feet. “Severus... how did you...?”

Severus walked up to him and held out a steaming teacup. “Drink,” he said.

Remus was dizzy, woozy from nerves and shock and the fumes, but he accepted the vessel without question, and drank. He pulled a face. “Just as disgusting as I remember,” he said appreciatively. Then, shaking his head to clear it, he asked, “This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“Have you had dreams like this before?”

“Yes. Several. Usually I wake up right before the first sip, though.”

Severus took a step back, and Remus was able to get a better look at the room. It was a state-of-the-art Potions lab, far nicer than the classroom in the dungeons. “Can the room generate potions ingredients?” Remus asked wonderingly.

“Some,” Severus replied. “I believe the conceit of the room’s magic is that it will provide what one truly *needs*. Most of the ingredients I could obtain myself, but the ones I *needed* simply appeared in the room.”

“Is that why you were in the greenhouses yesterday?”

“Yes. Astute of you, Lupin. But more than that, I needed space and privacy to brew, which this room provided.”

“So, does all of this mean that you *truly needed* to brew the Wolfsbane Potion for me?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “And so did everyone else at this school. You can’t afford another slip-up like you had in December.”

“You’re right. You’re very right, Severus. I just... I can’t believe you did this for me.”

“Once again, it was as much for my own safety as yours.”

“Mmhmm.” Remus sank into an armchair, and it was the most perfectly comfortable armchair he could ever possibly wish for. “Remarkable,” he said, still looking about dazedly.

“Lupin, are you intoxicated?” Severus asked.

Remus burst out laughing. “No! God, no, I’m just overwhelmed. I’m — I daresay I’m *euphoric*.”

Severus frowned. “I didn’t alter the recipe. It shouldn’t have any kind of psychoactive effect. Do you normally feel this way after taking it?”

“No, Severus,” Remus giggled. “It’s not the potion. I’m just very, very happy. I haven’t had Wolfsbane in two years, and you went out of your way to make it for me, and I’m just *so* surprised, and I was so nervous all day, but this is the best thing that could possibly happen tonight, and you did all this for *me*...”

“Do pull yourself together, Lupin,” Severus said, looking rather nervous himself.

“You’re right. Where are my manners? I haven’t even thanked you yet,” Remus said. He stretched out his arms in invitation. “Come here,” he commanded.

Severus looked suspicious, but he stepped closer to the chair. Remus leaned forward the rest of the way and grasped his hands. “*Thank you*,” he said. “This is the best Valentine’s Day gift I’ve ever received.”

“Valentine’s Day?” Severus seemed sincerely mystified. “No, it’s the first quarter moon.”

Rather than point out that the two events were not mutually exclusive, Remus said, “Well, then, I’ll call that part a gift from the moon. About damn time. She more than owes me.” Remus squeezed Severus’ hands, but Severus wrenched them away, wiping them on the sides of his robes. Then he turned back to his workbench, busying himself with cleaning the equipment.

Confused, Remus stuck his clenched hands into his pockets. “So,” he said, “are you going to publish the Wolfsbane Potion yourself? Now’s your chance.” His voice sounded annoyingly, falsely cheerful even to his own ears.

“Don’t be stupid,” Severus said. “Damocles Belby has already been working on it for years. The last thing I need is to draw attention to myself with a plagiarism allegation — and a highly justifiable one, at that.”

“Right. That seems reasonable.”

“And in any case, Belby’s research will go public in a few years. For now, all knowledge of the Wolfsbane Potion stays within this room.” Severus shot Remus an accusatory glare. “You *can* keep this a secret, can’t you, Lupin?”

“Of course! My friends won’t suspect a thing. I’ll be sure to act as wolflike as possible with them on the full moon.” Remus scrunched up his face. “Err, whatever that means. I guess I’ve never actually seen how I act as a wolf. But I’ll do my best.” Severus said nothing in response, so Remus

rose to his feet. "Anyway, I should get back before anyone misses me," he said.

"Be here tomorrow night at the same time," Severus said without looking up at him.

"Certainly. I wouldn't want all your hard work to go to waste." Remus paused in the doorway and cleared his throat. "By the way, earlier today we charmed our map to slag you off. Sorry. I feel a bit bad about it, considering."

"Lupin, I could not care less what you and your puerile friends get up to in your dorm."

"Okay. Sorry, though. Erm, just so you know, I didn't mean what I wrote. I actually quite like your nose. I like your whole face. Anyway..." Remus gave an awkward little wave, then quickly shoved his hand back in his pocket when he realised Severus wasn't paying him any attention. "Good night, Severus. Thank you again." Severus made an indistinct sound in response, and Remus left the room.

I like your face?! As soon as he was outside, Remus slumped against the spot where the vanishing door had been and heaved a shaky sigh. *Stupid.* When was he going to stop embarrassing himself? Every time he tried to reach out — literally or figuratively — Severus pulled away from him. But why? They had *kissed*, hadn't they? Surely it hadn't been some fever-dream brought on by the moon. Yet ever since that day, Severus had recoiled from every act of affection Remus had offered.

Remus could only draw one conclusion. Severus didn't want him anymore, now that he knew the truth. The Remus Lupin that Severus had kissed — the innocent, imaginary schoolboy — had been sweet and good; he had never doubted Severus, or abandoned him, or charmed a piece of parchment to insult his nose, or nearly *killed* him, for God's sake. Tabula Rasa Lupin was, without a doubt, far more appealing than the jaded middle-aged widower. But that version of himself had never really existed.

Of course Severus was repulsed by him now, just as he had been for decades. It was a wonder he didn't *detest* Remus for letting their brief and flimsy flirtation go as far as it had. But then, there was still plenty of time for Remus to ruin whatever fragile relationship remained to them; plenty of time to regain Severus' mistrust.

Remus went directly to the Prefects' Bath, hoping to scrub off the scent of Wolfsbane and maybe gently drown himself in bubbles while he was at it, but the door was locked. He rattled the handle a few times in frustration, then resigned himself to sloughing off the day in the Gryffindor showers instead. He took the stairs two at a time, hoping to avoid speaking to anyone else on the way. As he entered the shower room, he nearly collided with a third-year who came rushing out with a panicked look on his face. Remus thought for a moment about going after him, but decided he didn't have the capacity to be reassuring just then. Instead, he stepped inside.

"*Finally,*" Myrtle greeted him the moment the door clicked shut. "Hurry, lock the door."

"What?"

"Just lock it! I was scaring people away until you got here, but you won't want anyone else interrupting." Remus obeyed, perplexed. "Good, now come this way." She beckoned Remus into one of the shower stalls and pointed down at the drain. "They're in the Prefects' Bath. Went in there for privacy. They were still talking, last I checked. You should be able to hear them if you lean in close."

"Who... what? Myrtle, are you asking me to eavesdrop on someone's private conversation?"

"I'm *telling* you to," Myrtle corrected. "It's your friend. The really dishy one. He — "

That was all it took for Remus to drop to the ground. Rolling to one side and pressing his ear to the shower drain, he muttered, "I swear, Myrtle, if I get foot fungus on my face because of this..." He trailed off as the voices began to reverberate up to him. The sound was astoundingly clear, given how long and serpentine the plumbing system must have been between the two rooms. Not for the first time, Remus wondered if there was some kind of ghostly grapevine magic at play, beyond the comprehension of mortals like himself.

"...talk to whoever I damn well please, and there's nothing you can do about it." That was Sirius, without a doubt.

"Can't I just have *one thing* for myself? Just one thing in my entire life?"

"*One thing*? Prefect, Quidditch captain and *Death Eater* not enough to make you feel special? What about only son and heir? Does that suit you better?" Well, that confirmed who the other party was. Sirius' voice was dripping with sarcasm, yet unnervingly calm.

"Stop changing the subject, Sirius, you *know* what I'm talking about!"

"For the love of Godric Gryffindor and all the little lions up in heaven, I'm not trying to steal your bloody girlfriend, Regs."

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"Ooh, what, are you scared I'll tell Maman that you took a girl to Madame Puddifoot's outside of wedlock? You absolute twat."

"It's not like that!" Regulus wailed. "I don't even know if I fancy her yet, and now I'll never get to find out, because *you* got in the way and spoiled everything, just like you always do!"

"I already told you, I'm not interested in some silly Slytherin schoolgirl."

"I *know* you're not! That makes it worse! You did the *exact* same thing back in fourth year with Adelaide Flint. You didn't like her either, you just didn't want *her* to like *me*!"

"It's not my fault if people see you for who you really are."

There was a lull, and Remus strained to hear. Then a sound floated up through the pipes: a strangled sob. "*Why do you hate me so much?!*"

"Why do *you* hate muggles, and muggleborns, and all the other people you've decided are beneath you?" Sirius retorted icily.

"I don't hate anyone!" Regulus cried. "I only want — " His words dissolved into another round of heaving sobs.

"You actually believe that, don't you? You *stupid* — Well, Regulus, I can tell you that your new *associates* sure as hell don't share your moral scruples."

"They're... Yes, a few lowlives have gotten involved for the wrong reasons, but that doesn't take away from..."

"*From what*? Do you really still think you're on some kind of noble crusade? The Death Eaters are *mass murderers*, Regulus. It's not a *few* of them. It's the whole reason they exist, the *only* reason:

to kill and terrorise people who aren't like them. Who aren't like *us*." Sirius spat the last word with such contempt it almost burned.

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it now, Sirius?!"

"Now? Nothing. You've already dug your grave, now you can go and lie in it."

Silence. Remus thought perhaps something had clogged the passage; all he could hear for at least a minute was the pounding of his own heart. Then came a resounding "*FUCK!*" that tore straight through him. He could see Sirius in his mind's eye, doubled over in pain and clutching at his head; but it was an older, careworn Sirius that he saw. Remus hadn't heard that kind of anguish in his friend's voice since that last year at Grimmauld Place. "I'm sorry, Regs. I didn't mean that. I'm sorry..."

Whispers, murmurs, something Remus couldn't make out. Then he heard Regulus' voice again, high-pitched and tremulous. "All I wanted was to have a nice day out with a nice, pretty girl, and not worry about anything else. I just wanted to feel *normal* for an afternoon."

"I know," Sirius said, somewhere between soothing and stern, "I know, of course you did. You're seventeen. But you don't get to have that, Regulus; not anymore. You signed all that away when you... Look, can't you see it's not just yourself you're putting in danger anymore?"

A wretched, gasping whimper. "I don't want to be all alone."

"I know you don't, baby brother, I know, I know..."

Remus pulled away, feeling ashamed for listening. He was dizzy as he sat up. He ran a hand over his face to find it hot and wet with tears. His left cheek was imprinted with the pattern of the shower grate. "It sounds bad, doesn't it?" Myrtle asked, wringing her hands.

"I actually want to take a shower now," Remus said flatly, "if you wouldn't mind..."

"But what are we going to — "

"*We* are not going to do anything, Myrtle," Remus snapped.

Myrtle flickered like a fluorescent lamp going out, illusory tears shining in her eyes. "Oh," she said meekly. "I just wanted to help."

Remus sighed and rubbed at his face. "I know, Myrtle. I'm sorry. I've just had a very long day."

She clucked her tongue. "Oh, petal. Did things not go well with Severus Snape?"

Remus started. "Who said anything about Snape?" he replied too quickly.

"Sorry," Myrtle said, "I meant your mysterious, anonymous Valentine's Day date."

"It wasn't a date."

"Ohhh. Well, that's a shame. And you were so looking forward to it..."

"It's fine." Remus began to disrobe, hoping she would get the hint. "Thanks for letting me know about — " he tilted his head toward the shower drain " — that thing I'm not supposed to know about. Good night, Myrtle."

"Good night, love. I'm going to go check up on that poor, dear boy before he goes off to bed."

With that, Myrtle disappeared down the drain. It took a moment for Remus to realise that she was talking about Regulus.

Remus turned the shower dial as high as it would go, intending to excoriate himself. He was so exhausted he nearly fell asleep on his feet, but as the water began to run cool he gradually came back to his senses. He dried himself with a charm, dressed, and moved to the door. "Whoops," he muttered as he jiggled the doorknob. "*Alohamora*."

Sirius was waiting on the other side of the door with a menacing glare. "Jesus! You startled me," Remus exclaimed.

"Maybe you shouldn't have locked the door then, asshole."

"Sorry, I forgot I did that," Remus said as Sirius shoved past him. "What, no jokes? I as good as handed you that one on a silver platter," he called after Sirius' retreating back.

"I'm not in the mood," Sirius snarled. He punctuated his words by slamming a stall door shut.

Fuck. Remus drew the door to the showers closed behind him, guiding it into place with a barely audible click. He thought he had better clear out before Sirius realised he had used up all the hot water.

Sprawling Season

It was the first warm day of springtime, and Remus had nowhere to be except snoozing out on the lawn. Sirius had been with him for a little while, but he'd gone off when a small group of students racing on brooms diverted his attention. Remus preferred to stay where he was, slowly baking on the surface of his black wool robes and thinking about nothing in particular.

His half-slumber was interrupted when the air cooled around the crown of his head and he felt, rather than saw, a shadow fall across him. At first, he assumed that Sirius had come back; but when the shadow remained silent and made no move to join him on the ground, he realised who it must be.

"When the great Alexander visited the cynic Diogenes at Corinth, he asked if there was anything he could do for the man; to which Diogenes responded, yes, you can get out of my sunlight."

"What?"

Remus lifted his chin lazily, squinting against the sudden onslaught of light as he peered up at Severus. "I read a lot of Plutarch as a child."

"Plutarch? What kind of child reads Plutarch?" Severus shifted. Remus could have purred when he felt the sun upon his face again. "You really, wholeheartedly embraced the whole 'sickly Victorian schoolboy' image, didn't you?"

Remus laughed into his sleeve. "Well, I needed something to occupy me when I couldn't go out to play hoop-and-stick. Actually, I only started reading the book because it had my name in it, but it turned out I liked the other stories, too. Go on, sit down if you like, I'm tired of craning my neck."

Severus wavered for a moment, then kneeled ungracefully next to Remus. Remus rolled to his side, propping his head on one arm so that he could face Severus, and invited him to sit on his outstretched robe.

"You ought to take better care of your things," Severus admonished, though he was happy enough to accept the seat.

"Diogenes wore rags and lived in a barrel," Remus said.

"Ah, then I can see why you identify with him," Severus retorted.

Remus yawned. "So, what was it you came here to yell at me about?" he asked. Severus looked briefly surprised, and Remus wondered if he'd forgotten his purpose.

"I didn't come to yell at you," Severus said. "I simply came to ask you a question."

"Fine. Go ahead."

Severus looked as if he'd just sipped sour milk. "Fine," he echoed. "What is Black playing at?" Severus crossed his arms and tried to look severe, but the effect was mitigated by the awkward way he was kneeling.

"What do you mean?"

"You *know* what I mean. Why is he cozying up to Slytherin underclassmen all of a sudden? You saw him at the breakfast table this morning."

Remus had indeed, although on that particular morning, Sirius had mostly just sat there listening as Demosthenes Doty rapturously described the year his American grandmother took him to see the cherry blossoms in Washington, D.C. over Easter, occasionally reacting as if it were the most interesting story he'd ever heard in his life. "I suppose he's trying to make new friends," Remus said. "It's only the second day of Easter hols, but believe me, it gets old fast, having only me for company."

"So he's decided to befriend a bunch of children?"

"He's actually quite good with them, you know," Remus said with a shrug. "Or, at least, children seem to adore him." Severus' expression darkened in that telltale way that meant he was thinking of Harry Potter.

"Yes, yes, I understand that Black wants to train a little posse of admirers to follow at his beck and call. That's nothing new. What I'm asking you is why he's suddenly extended the invitation to Slytherins as well."

Remus grinned. "Are you sure you're not just bothered because the Slytherin children actually like him?"

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Did you put him up to this, Lupin?"

"You say that like he has some sort of ulterior motive," Remus said, flashing the innocent smile that had gotten him out of so many detentions as a boy.

"Stop it. That doesn't work on me. I *know* he has an ulterior motive. I want to know what *yours* is."

"Sirius has plenty of motivation all on his own," Remus said, which was true, if not quite an answer to the question. His innocent smile turned mischievous (as it almost invariably tended to do). "For starters, it annoys the hell out of Regulus."

"And?"

"And, like you said, he loves being the centre of attention."

"Lupin, will you be straight with me for once?"

“Straight? Never.”

“*Lupin.*”

“Fine.” Remus buried his face in the crook of his arm, as if hoping his sleeve would absorb his next words. “He’s trying to befriend them and put them off the whole pureblood supremacy thing.”

“That’s a new approach,” Severus said. His voice was cutting.

Remus looked back up. “Look, there’s only so much I can do. Sirius is his own autonomous person. He wants to help, and this is how he’s going about it now. And, by the way, Lily’s completely in on it with him.”

“I know,” Severus growled.

“Oh. So you were interrogating me just for the fun of it, then?”

“I wanted you to confirm my suspicions about Black. Lily doesn’t like to speak of him around me.”

“You shock me.”

“And, yes, Lupin, I wanted to make you squirm. You deserve it. Have you forgotten our agreement?”

“You *know* I haven’t. It’s just... it’s all so *complicated*.”

“Indeed it is. Say your plan — excuse me, I mean *Black’s* plan — actually works. Have you thought about how Black’s newfound converts will feel in a few years when he turns out to be the Death Eater who murdered twelve muggles and Peter Pettigrew?”

Remus felt as if ice water had been dumped over him. “I...”

“No. You didn’t think that far ahead, did you?”

“Let me finish,” Remus said quietly. “I imagine they’ll feel a lot like *I* did.”

Remus pressed his face downward again. He waited for Severus to say something caustic, but nothing came. There was a rustling sound and a tautening of the robe-blanket. When Remus opened his eyes again, Severus had settled into a seated position. Remus began to relax again when he realised he was not about to be chastised.

“Was there something else?” Remus finally asked. He hoped he wouldn’t regret it.

“Yes,” Severus said. He seemed nervous. Remus perked up.

“So?” Remus prompted, when he felt he’d been patient for long enough.

“I heard you had a birthday recently,” Severus said.

“That’s right,” Remus confirmed, immediately intrigued.

“This is for you.” Severus reached into his robes and pulled out a small, folded piece of parchment, which he stiffly handed over to Remus. The outside was blank; the inside read *Congratulations, you’re 38 - 22 + 2.*

Remus practically shrieked with glee. “A card! You made me a card!”

“Yes. Is that all right?” Severus asked, obviously taken aback by Remus’ reaction.

“I love it. It’s a very good joke,” Remus said through a fit of elated giggles. “It’s a shame I can’t keep it around,” he sighed.

“I’ll destroy it for you, if you like,” Severus offered.

“No!” Remus clutched the card to his chest. “I want to hold on to it. Just for a little while.” He tucked it into his breast pocket.

“Suit yourself.” Severus extended his legs in front of him.

They both fell silent. They sat like that for a long time, Remus nearly dozing off again, and Severus — well, if Severus Snape were a fidgeter, he probably would have been fidgeting just then. Languidly contented as he was, it took Remus some time to notice his companion’s restlessness. Eventually Severus sighed, stretched, and shifted his position, like an insomniac trying to settle into bed. “Is this really what you lot do for fun? Just loll about on the grass all day?” Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Actually,” Remus corrected, “this is sprawling, not lolling. Lolling is more of a summertime pursuit.”

“Do you make a distinction between the two?”

“Oh, yes. I’m very precise in my terminology.”

“I see. I wasn’t aware that befriending Remus Lupin would require the use of a glossary. Perhaps mine got lost in the post?”

Remus sat up, propping himself on one wrist. “You think we’re friends?” he asked.

Severus blanched. “Well, not if... That is... I thought perhaps...”

Remus immediately realised how poor his phrasing had been, and rushed to correct himself. “I’m glad we’re friends,” he said quickly. “I’m just happy to know you think of me that way, too.”

“All right,” Severus grumbled, going from pale to puce. “There’s no need to make a production out of it.”

Remus smiled broadly as he sank back down to his elbows. Feeling brave, he placed a hand on top of Severus’. Severus let it rest there for a few heartbeats before pulling away. “I should get back inside,” he said stiffly.

“Oh. Sure,” Remus said, perplexed. He’d thought the conversation had been going well, for once.

Severus wore a peculiar facial expression that Remus had come to think of as a near-blush: his face didn’t colour, but he cringed as if it had. “Perhaps we could meet in the library tomorrow and discuss our research,” Severus murmured, brushing invisible dirt from his knees.

“Yes,” Remus agreed. Then, buoyed by Severus’ words, he added, “Or you could sit back down, and we could keep talking now, while the sun is shining.”

“Actually, I’d like to spend some time reviewing my notes. There’s one question that’s been gnawing...” Severus stopped abruptly and pursed his lips, as if he’d let slip something he hadn’t meant to say. Naturally, this piqued Remus’ interest.

“Try me. Maybe we can work it out together.”

“No, I wouldn’t want to trouble you with a half-formed thought.” Severus’ near-blush turned into a blush-blush. Curiouser and curiouser.

“That’s exactly the sort of thought you should be troubling me with, or else what’s the point of having me around?” Remus argued.

Severus gave him a penetrating look. Remus thought hard about chips and cheese, just in case.

“Fine,” Severus said at last, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He stretched his legs back out, but he looked far less relaxed than earlier.

“Fine,” Remus echoed.

“What I’ve been struggling with...” Severus cleared his throat. He seemed intently focused on his own feet. “You said something, before...”

“Yes?” Remus prompted, straightening and propping himself a little higher.

“If I’m not mistaken, you implied that you were responsible for the mistletoe charm on Christmas Day.”

“Ah. Yes. I’ve been thinking about that too,” Remus said. “I could be wrong, of course. It wasn’t something I did consciously. But... it just felt familiar, you know? I know this is hardly sound evidence, but it just *felt* like my own magic, in here.” He tapped on his sternum.

Severus looked sceptical. “I don’t know about *that*, but... Very well. So you think it was something you manifested unconsciously. And the location of the mistletoe sprigs...”

“...all places that were significant to you and I. I mean, to us.”

Severus’ brow furrowed. Remus had noticed that a permanent line was already etching into Severus’ elastic adolescent skin. “But that makes no sense. I first noticed the mistletoe after I came to teach at Hogwarts in 1981. How could you possibly have cast it, consciously or not, when none of *this* had happened?”

“That is troubling,” Remus murmured. “I suppose it could be a sign that the boundaries between this timeline and the other are more porous than we thought.”

“Are you suggesting that we’re in a parallel timeline that has, in some way, always existed alongside our own?” Severus rubbed at the crease between his brows.

“I don’t know. When you put it like that, it’s hard to grapple with. It gives me a headache, too,” Remus said sympathetically. “Severus... do you think it could be possible to send your magic back in time without travelling back yourself?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, maybe my future self could have cast it. As, I don’t know, some sort of signposting.”

“You mean you, in the future, might somehow create a charm that would take effect two decades before you cast it?” Severus was looking at Remus like he was stupid, and Remus didn’t appreciate it very much.

“I don’t know. It was just an idea.”

“You realise that magic doesn’t work like that, don’t you? Otherwise, I would have just cast a killing curse back in time and hit Tom Riddle in his cradle.”

“Well, obviously that’s not possible, but... No, I don’t know. I don’t have an answer, Severus.”

“This is why I wanted to do more research before we discussed it.”

“Oh, stop. You were right to talk to me first. There’s not a single book in the library that could have told you the significance of the mistletoe.”

“No,” Severus conceded. “Not unless your future self wrote a book and sent it back in time to the stacks.”

Remus gaped at him. “You’re making fun of me!”

“Well, you’re talking nonsense,” Severus countered.

“Yes,” Remus said, “but using humour as a deflection is *my* move. Get your own.”

Severus snorted, but didn’t respond. That was probably for the best. Remus knew that Severus did, in fact, have plenty of his own deflection tactics, most of them far less pleasant than gentle mockery. He didn’t want to push his luck.

After a minute or two, Remus rolled over onto his back. He stared into the unmarred blue until his eyes ached. Just as they were beginning to flutter shut, Severus spoke again. “The Whomping Willow, I understand. The significance is obvious there. The Potions classroom, Defence classroom, and Staffroom, as well. The courtyard...”

“...is where we had our first conversation after fifteen years, yes.”

“Yes. But what about the Restricted Section of the library? Forgive me, but I can’t remember ever encountering you there.”

“Oh. No, you wouldn’t,” Remus said sheepishly.

“But you do?”

“Yes, well, you have to understand that I was very vexed with you at the time, as I’d just spent my evening grading a stack of abysmal essays on werewolves...”

“And?”

“And I saw you headed into the Restricted Section, and I was *very* cross with you, mind you, so I sort of hid, and then I jinxed you so that your fingerprints would leave ink on whatever you touched.”

Severus’ eyes widened. “That was you? *You’re* the reason I incurred the wrath of Irma Pince? I gave the Weasley twins a weekend of detention for that, you know.” He scowled. “I should have guessed it was you. I suppose I assumed you would move on from childish pranks once you became a professor. More fool me.”

“Yes, well, you’re right, it was childish of me, but it was *so* long ago, and don’t you think it’s rather funny and charming in hindsight? Don’t you?” Remus asked, glancing nervously in Severus’ direction.

“I assure you, there was nothing funny about the fine I had to pay.”

“That still doesn’t preclude charming,” Remus pointed out. “I am sorry, though. I owe you dinner for that one, at least.”

“At the *very* least, you owe me a week’s worth of dinners. And don’t you dare try to skimp. I deserve three courses and a bottle of wine.”

“Deal,” Remus said with a grin. “Seven dinners, consecutive or non-. You just name the dates.”

Severus looked uncomfortable again. Perhaps Remus shouldn’t have used the word ‘dates.’ But Severus’ mind seemed to be elsewhere. “That just leaves the Astronomy Tower,” he said.

“Right,” Lupin replied. He had been turning it over in his mind ever since that day. “The Astronomy Tower. I’ve been thinking, and I believe it’s because that’s where...”

“Where I became a murderer,” Severus said, cutting him off. His voice was flat like a blade.

“No,” Remus said softly. “That’s where we kissed for the first time.”

Severus angled his head to frown at Remus, and his face was eclipsed by shade. “That hadn’t happened yet.”

“So? We’ve already established that the whole thing defies the rules of linear time.”

“But that hadn’t happened in *either* timeline yet, so what you’re saying makes even less sense than usual.”

“Maybe it was more of a hope, a wish, than a memory. Maybe it was meant to guide us there, to that moment, together,” Remus said, tilting his face to meet Severus’ gaze without lifting up off the ground.

Severus looked away. “That doesn’t fit with *any* of the theories we’ve discussed, and it doesn’t stand on its own logic, either.”

“Does it have to be logical?” Remus asked, frustration welling within him. “In case you’ve forgotten, it’s *magic*.”

“Magic is logical,” Severus shot back. “You sound like a muggle.”

Remus groaned in vexation. “So what if I do?” He shifted and propped himself on a straight arm, bringing himself to Severus’ eye level. The tendons in his wrist and forearm grew white against his skin. “If being like a muggle means having a sense of wonder, of mystery; believing that magic can exist beyond the world as we know it...”

“Spare me the theatrics, Lupin,” Severus sneered. The words hit Remus like a blow to the gut.

“Theatrics?” he echoed disbelievingly. “Fine,” he huffed, scrambling to his knees. “Just, get off my robe... thank you,” he mumbled through gritted teeth as he tugged his makeshift blanket out from under Severus. He lifted himself to a high kneel as he pulled the dirt-encrusted robe back over his shoulders. “Obviously, theatrics aren’t *your* strong suit, or you wouldn’t have missed your cue to kiss me. Which you did. By a mile.”

“Lupin, I — my *what*?” Severus had the gall to look shocked. Unbelievable.

“You know, when I was gazing up at you all starry-eyed, talking about how I’d wished and hoped for it? That would have been the moment, if you hadn’t been so busy finding fault with me.”

Severus was frozen on one bent knee, staring at Remus with his damned inscrutable eyes. Remus knew he should stand up and walk away, but he couldn't bring himself to storm off, not yet. He waited, not knowing exactly what for. Finally, Severus broke eye contact. "It's fine, Remus. You don't need to keep up this pretence. Not for my sake, and certainly not from some misguided sense of guilt, or *chivalry*, or whatever this" — he gestured at the air between them — "is."

"Pretence?" Remus repeated, baffled.

"I mean, you don't have to carry on acting like everything is as it was before. I'm well aware that any burgeoning... attachment we may have had was built on a mutual lie, and now circumstances have changed. There's no need to pretend otherwise."

"Is that..." Remus swallowed hard. He had begun to feel lightheaded as Severus spoke. "Is that what you think I'm doing? *Pretending*? You really believe that I liked you better when I thought you were seventeen?"

"Yes," Severus said, frowning. "Didn't you?"

Remus let out a shallow laugh. "No. No, Severus, I was *never* interested in you as a teenager."

"I see." And just like that, he could see Severus shutting down, closing in, drawing the metaphorical drapes and locking the door, and Remus began to panic.

"Wait! Oh, God, why does everything I say come out wrong? I didn't mean it like you think. I laughed because you've just described how I thought *you* felt about *me*. Severus, you're right, our circumstances have completely changed, and I couldn't be happier about it. I never wanted you as a teenager; I wanted you the way you are now. I wanted you old and ragged and scarred, like me." Remus smiled shyly. "I miss all the lines on your face. But other than that, you're exactly the man I wanted. You're *perfect*."

Perfect. The word was half-formed on Severus' lips; Remus watched him run a hand over his face, as if searching for the invisible lines. It was a strangely unselfconscious gesture. Almost as quickly, he seemed to snap out of it. "Are you sure?" His voice was more feeble than Remus had ever heard it.

Remus could have laughed again. "Yes, pretty sure."

"Because all of this has been disorienting, for both of us..."

"Severus," Remus chided him, without any anger. "I know how I feel, and I'm finally telling you the truth. I adore you. If you're not interested, that's all right, Severus; just tell me, and I'll leave it be. But if you are... Well, I'm going to lie back on the grass now, and if you like, you can lie down next to me, and we can hold hands and gaze into each other's eyes like a couple of lovestruck teens. And then, just maybe, I'll give you a second chance to kiss me."

Severus considered Remus for an agonisingly long moment. Remus watched his trachea move up and down as he swallowed. "Go on, then," Severus said hoarsely. "Lay out your robe again. I won't be seen with grass-stains on my clothes."

That evening, Remus sat up by candlelight composing a neatly lettered scroll, humming tunelessly

and smiling to himself as he wrote.

Compendium of Lupinisms: A Guide For New Friends

friendship: The all-important Object of Life Itself.

'I don't care': This is a lie. I always care.

'I'm fine': You're on thin ice. Tread lightly.

'It's nothing': It's definitely something.

loafing: To lie by the fireside with one's friends. A strictly indoor activity.

lolling: Like sprawling (see below), but more luxuriant. May result in a glorious suntan or an excruciating burn — a complete toss-up.

lounging: May be done wherever sprawling, lolling, or loafing take place, but requires a hot drink and a book or two which one must not, under any circumstances, actually crack open to read.

love: The feeling of having mulled wine in one hand and a mince pie in the other.

marauding: Nine times out of ten, this is used to mean 'fetching snacks from the kitchen.'

Moony: A name which must never be spoken in polite company.

sprawling: To lie in the grass with one's friends and think of nothing. The most perfect of all human activities, always to be pursued and never squandered.

time: A commodity with no intrinsic worth; a vessel, the value of which is determined by its contents. (See above for suggestions.)

Quiet

“Yes!” Remus watched the stone skim across the surface of the water once, twice, three, four, five, six times before it finally sank with a satisfying *plunk*. He twisted his upper body to look back at the bank. “You weren’t even watching, were you?” he asked with a pout.

“Hmm?”

“I just outdid myself with that one, and you missed it!”

“I think I’ll survive,” Severus said, without raising his eyes from his book.

“Haven’t you ever skipped stones?”

“No, somehow that was never quite a priority in my life...”

“Do you want to try?” Remus asked. “Come on! You don’t have to stand in the water,” he said, wiggling his bare toes. He was about ankle-deep himself.

“I’d rather leave it to you,” Severus said.

“Well, do you want to find me some more stones, at least? The flattest ones you can. Like this one,” Remus said, showing an example from his dwindling collection.

Remus turned back to the lake. It was a bright and brisk day; wispy clouds raced one another across the domed sky while towering cumuli circled the horizon, no doubt dumping rain on some other poor sod’s picnic off in the distance. The water on the loch was choppy, and as the waves lapped over Remus’ feet he could almost imagine that he was by the sea. Every so often, a particularly large wave would undulate toward the shore and splash up his calves. As there were generally no motorboats out on the water, Remus suspected that the giant squid was causing these disturbances.

It was the perfect day to laze about and enjoy simple pleasures. Shame it was also the full moon. Remus sighed and rotated his shoulders a few times. He could actually feel the fibres in his muscles seizing up, as if they were going one by one.

Lost in thought, Remus jumped when Severus suddenly appeared behind him. “Here,” Severus said brusquely, dropping a small pile of stones at his feet.

“Oh! Thanks,” Remus said. He scooped them up and continued his game, but he found that with Severus standing so close behind him, he was suddenly less interested in skipping stones. Feeling a bit silly, he worked his way down to the bottom of the pile. “One more left. Sure you don’t want to try?” he asked Severus with his most beguiling smile.

With an enormous sigh, as if it were a massive imposition on him, Severus took the stone from Remus’ hand. He narrowed his eyes in concentration and spent a long moment calculating the trajectory. Finally, he tossed the stone. It skipped once, sort of, then sank like a plumb. “Happy?” Severus asked, sounding frustrated. Remus found this adorable, but thought he’d better not comment.

“Yes,” Remus said, grinning. He stepped out of the water and drew closer to Severus. “I’d like to kiss you now. Is that all right?”

“Not out here,” Severus murmured, looking about apprehensively.

“Oh. Sorry.” Remus dragged Severus behind a tree. “Now, unless someone’s got a telescope trained on us across the lake, I think we should be fine here.” He threw his arms about Severus and kissed him. He had been doing it as often as possible for the past five days. Severus had responded mostly with polite bemusement; but so far, every time, he had said...

“I’m sorry. I didn’t wait for you to say yes,” Remus said, growing anxious.

“Yes,” Severus whispered. He cleared his throat. “I think, at a certain point, it would be more efficient to say that you have blanket permission.”

“Oh. And have we reached that point?” Remus asked, daring to hope.

Severus looked uncomfortable, and Remus almost wanted to take his words back; but then Severus murmured, “Until further notice, yes.”

“Good.” Remus couldn’t help the smile that split his face as he said the word. He kissed Severus again. “And ditto for you, should you feel so inclined.” Then Remus leaned back and looked about. “Where did I leave my shoes?” he asked with a frown.

“Are your feet cold?” Severus asked, and then, lest Remus mistake him for concerned, he added, “I told you so.”

“It’s not that,” Remus said. “It’s just that you’re taller than me when you’ve got shoes on and I haven’t.”

Severus smirked. “I’m taller than you without shoes, too,” he said.

“I doubt that,” Remus disagreed.

“I am. I’ve gained a good half-inch on you in the last year.”

Remus returned his smirk. “Tall people don’t count in half-inches, Severus.”

“I hardly think you’re one to talk. Speaking of which...” Severus ghosted his fingers over Remus’ frame, tracing the curve of his shoulder from the base of his jaw to the top of his bicep. Remus shivered at the touch. “When are you finally going to grow outward?” Severus asked.

“Oh, in another year or two.”

Severus sighed. “That’s a long time to wait,” he said wistfully.

“Don’t I know it. Worse, I’ll be a strapping young man for about a year or so, then the arthritis will set in and I’ll start going grey. Did you know I started dying my hair when I was twenty-two? That was back when I still had a smidgen of vanity. I let go of that soon enough.” As he spoke, Remus trailed one hand lower, resting it in the narrow hollow of Severus’ waist, already waspish and defined. In their thirties, Remus had not-infrequently wondered — without quite knowing why — what Severus was shaped like under his billowing black robes. In hindsight, he really ought to have recognised the reason for his curiosity sooner. Remus chuckled softly at himself.

Severus drew back; whether it was because of Remus’ touch, or his laughter, or some internal force Remus was not privy to, the moment had run its course. Remus smiled gently. “Do you want to go back to the castle now?” he asked.

"Yes," Severus said.

"All right. You go ahead without me. I need to get my shoes back on."

Severus nodded. "I'll see you this evening for your last dose of Wolfsbane," he said. He hesitated for a moment, then, colouring slightly, he added, "Are you still feeling well?"

"Yes. Well enough, thank you. See you later," Remus replied. He stayed by the loch a little longer, enjoying the quiet, listening to the water rolling over the pebbled shore, the occasional cry of a gull mingling with the birdsong that emanated from the trees. Eventually the windchill started to get to him, and he turned to walk back to the school.

Halfway back, he came across Sirius sunbathing on the lawn. He was lying on his stomach, using his Muggle Studies textbook as a makeshift pillow. His posture was oddly canine, his chin flat against the book and his eyes looking up, alert. He raised his head as Remus drew near. "Hello, Moony," he called out.

"Hello," Remus responded tepidly. He felt a knot forming in his stomach. Surely Sirius had also spotted Severus passing the same way a scant twenty minutes earlier. It wasn't exactly a secret that Remus and Severus had become close, but that didn't mean he wanted to discuss it with his friends. More to the point, Remus dreaded the confrontation that was (regardless of the impulsive promise James had made last autumn) bound to arise if any of them discovered the precise nature of his feelings for Severus. Remus reached compulsively into his pocket, running his thumb along the edge of the Map that had been in his constant possession for the past week. Still, Sirius didn't need the Map to know where Remus had been, and with whom.

"Want to sit with me?" Sirius asked. "I've been 'revising,' as you can see."

"No, thanks. I got a bit chilly down by the lake. I'll see you later, though."

"Right." Sirius' voice took on a steely edge. "Well, Snape went that way, if you're looking for him," he said, pointing.

"I'm not," Remus said crisply, charging off in the opposite direction, even though it took him on a long detour around the back of the castle. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

By the time Remus finally got back to the Gryffindor common room, shivering and aching, he felt more than a little foolish. Worse, Sirius had somehow managed to beat him back and was stretched out on a sofa, leafing through his textbook. "Hello again. Did you know that muggles make clothing out of plastic?" he asked earnestly, without looking up at Remus.

"Erm, yes." Remus perched on the arm of the sofa by Sirius' feet. "Hey, Sirius."

Sirius lowered his book. His expression grew harder again, as if he'd only just remembered that he was angry with Remus. Remus was torn between his instinct to apologise and his urge to get angry right back. He settled for something in-between.

"I'm not going to apologise for my friendship with Severus," he said as phlegmatically as he could.

Sirius huffed. "Oh, get your head out of your arse, will you? I don't *care* if you want to be friends with Snape." Remus raised his brow sceptically. "All right, fine, I *do* care, but we're going to have to save that conversation for another time, because that's not why I'm annoyed with you at the moment. I'm annoyed because you've spent the last few days hanging about him like you're suddenly joined at the hip or something, and I'm so fucking *bored!*"

Remus immediately felt awful. He'd been so busy feeling self-righteous that it hadn't even occurred to him that Sirius might be lonely. Sirius always *seemed* to have people about him; but if Remus had thought about it for a moment, he would have realised that the fawning attentions of a few underclassmen were not a proper substitute for close friendship. And Sirius was completely right. Since the beginning of Easter holidays, Remus and Sirius had barely seen each other outside of meals and bedtimes. "I'm sorry," Remus said sincerely. "I've been so wrapped up in... well, never mind. I've not been a very good friend lately, have I?"

"Not to *me*, anyway," Sirius grumbled.

"You're right," Remus said, swallowing thickly. "You're absolutely right. I've been a prat. I'll tell you what. I'm completely yours for the rest of the day. What do you want to do? We can do whatever you like."

"Well, all right. I guess I could forgive you this time..." Sirius appeared to consider for a moment. "Maybe we could play fetch?" he asked hopefully.

Remus blinked, unsure if his friend was joking or not. James played with Padfoot out on the lawn sometimes, for a laugh, when they were sure no one would spot them, but was that actually what Sirius wanted to do with his afternoon? "What, as a dog or as a human?" Remus asked teasingly.

"Come on. I'm tired of being cooped up. I just want to go run around. Please?" He put up his hands and mimicked a begging dog, whining.

"Okay, okay," Remus said, laughing. "Let me change into something more suitable, though." They returned to their dorm, where Remus hung up his robes and pulled on a t-shirt. Zipping his anorak, he said, "This is made of plastic, by the way."

"Really?" Sirius asked, eyes wide. Remus stuck out his arm so that Sirius could feel the baggy sleeve. "I had no idea. So this jacket could have been a dinosaur corpse, once?"

"Never thought of it that way, but I suppose it's possible."

"That's very rock-and-roll," Sirius said appreciatively.

The idea of describing anything in his wardrobe as 'rock-and-roll' made Remus laugh even harder. "Ready?" he asked.

Sirius summoned a Quaffle from amongst James' things and, grinning, transfigured it into a squeaky toy. "Let's go!"

They played until Padfoot was huffing and puffing and Remus had a stitch in his side. Finally Remus collapsed on the lawn, sweaty and exhausted, and Padfoot bounded over to him, pouncing and licking his face. "Eugh," Remus complained through gales of laughter, "did you eat a dead squirrel or something while I wasn't looking?" Padfoot only panted happily and stuck his wet nose under Remus' chin.

In that moment of absolute, unbridled, dizzying joy, Remus made a resolution. He would *not* choose between Severus and his friends. Of course, no one had actually asked him to choose. But still. He was resolved.

It was always a drag when full moon came in the middle of school holidays, and Remus was grateful that Sirius would be there with him this time. Even with the Wolfsbane Potion, he was trepidatious about transforming alone again.

February's moon had been a dream; the most — the *only* — enjoyable full moon of his entire life. To retain his consciousness all night while he gambolled through the forest with his friends... he had imagined it a thousand times, but never thought it could come true. All of those merry and reckless childhood adventures he would never remember, stories he'd relived vicariously through his friends, happy memories he'd had to invent to get him through his darkest years — now at last he had something tangible to hold onto, and it was sweeter than he'd ever imagined. He had cried tears of joy upon transforming back, and, shamefacedly, he'd lied to his friends and pretended they were tears of pain.

That night, Remus was exhausted. Padfoot regarded him with great confusion when he refused to leave the Shack, but it was pissing it down and all the wolf really wanted to do was sleep inside where it was warm. He settled on the tattered rug. (Why was there even still a rug in there? Not that he was complaining.) After a lot of whining and scratching, Padfoot finally got the message and curled up beside him. The wolf gave his friend a couple of licks behind the ear, threw a paw over him, and fell asleep.

The worst part of taking the Wolfsbane was having to fully experience his transformations. There was no relief from consciousness; he was present for the whole excruciating ordeal. As the moon vanished with the night, Remus could hear a voice whispering words of comfort, calling him by name. He tried to focus on the voice, clinging to kindness instead of pain. Thankfully, his transformation seemed to pass relatively quickly this time, though he may have just blacked out for part of it. Next, he was dimly aware of Sirius swaddling him in his robes. "You all right, Moony?" Sirius asked. As Remus' vision began to unblur, he saw that Sirius' face was wrought with concern.

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I... be...?" Remus slurred. He screwed his eyes shut, waiting for the first wave of nausea and vertigo to pass. At last he drew a deep breath, feeling much more like himself. "Oh, God, it reeks in here. Even worse than usual," he said, scrunching his nose.

"Yeah, well, that's because *someone* didn't want to go outside last night," Sirius scolded him.

Remus flushed. "Oh, no. Did I...?"

"No, I did, but I'm still blaming you for it," Sirius said flippantly.

"Lovely," Remus groaned. "We should get back..."

"To bed? Good idea. Come on old boy, don't be silly. It's far too early, *and* it's the weekend, *and* it's Easter hols. Sleep in, for once." Sirius vanished his mess as best he could, then guided Remus over to the shabby bed. Remus *was* very tired still. He allowed himself to be tucked in, and drifted off with the warm weight of Padfoot's head resting on his abdomen.

When Remus woke again, Padfoot was twitching violently in his sleep. Remus had witnessed this behaviour before, and he had always wondered if Padfoot dreamed like other dogs of chasing rabbits and sneaking treats. This felt different, though. Remus shook Sirius until he woke and transformed, almost in the same gasping breath. It was alarming to see; no doubt it was even more alarming to experience. Sirius was wild-eyed and disoriented for a moment before he recognised his surroundings.

"Oh," Sirius said breathlessly. "Good morning. Are you feeling all right?"

“Am *I* all right? Yes, but — ”

“Are you sure? I was worried. You didn’t want to do anything last night. You just lay there like a lump and slept the whole time.”

“I — I was probably just tired,” Remus said, silently cursing himself. “I actually feel much better than usual this morning. But you — look at you, Padfoot, you look like you’ve just broken a fever. Are *you* all right?”

“Fine,” Sirius said. He rearranged himself and leaned back against the headboard. “I’m completely fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“All right. I won’t,” Remus said, and waited for Sirius to tell him what was really going on.

Sirius shuddered. “I just had a hell of a dream,” he said at last.

“Not a good one, I take it?”

Sirius shook his head. “No. Not good.”

“You can tell me about it. I mean, if you want to.”

“Hm.” Sirius stared into the middle distance. “It really was dreadful. I don’t know if I should...”

“You don’t have to.”

“Thanks.” Sirius took a deep breath. “I was back in my bedroom at Grimmauld Place. And it looked the way it did when I was a boy. But I was the age I am now... I think.” Remus nodded in mild encouragement. “But I was also a dog. I mean, I was me, but dog me was there too, and he was sitting on my lap. And I couldn’t quite figure out which one I was meant to be.”

“Well, you were sleeping in dog form,” Remus pointed out inanely.

“And Regulus was there, too, but he wasn’t being his usual tiresome self. He was... calm. Really, weirdly calm. And he... I think he was holding me, the way our nanny used to do whenever I scraped a knee or whatever stupid things I used to cry about.”

“Not stupid,” Remus murmured, feeling his chest tighten with sorrow. “All children cry, Sirius.”

“And I was crying in the dream,” Sirius said, looking increasingly discomfited.

“Mm.”

“And Regulus — he kept telling me that everything was all right. That he was all right, and everything would be fine. Just... saying all these stupid, empty words, the way people do.”

“No, not stupid,” Remus said again.

“And I was crying, and I told him he was wrong, because he was dead, so of course he wasn’t all right, and nothing was fine. But he just kept hushing me and telling me not to worry — he said he didn’t mind being dead, so I shouldn’t cry — ” Sirius broke off with a gasp. Tears clung to his lashes without falling.

“Oh, Sirius. That *is* a hell of a dream,” Remus said. He had no idea how to reassure his friend. There wasn’t much he could say.

"Hell. Yes. I remember saying... I said that if he was dead, I must be dead too; we must be in Hell. But all he said was, 'not yet.' What does that *mean*?"

"I don't know," Remus answered honestly. "Maybe nothing. If you want me to hazard a guess, though, I'd say it means you're worried about him."

"Cheers," Sirius said thickly. "I sort of worked that one out for myself."

"Sirius, it was only a dream. Regulus is alive and well, and just as tiresome as ever," Remus said with forced blitheness. He felt sick with guilt even as he said the words. Not a lie, yet; but in a year or so it would no longer be true.

"I know," Sirius said, blinking rapidly. "Sorry. You didn't need to hear all that."

"I'm *happy* to listen, Sirius. You know that."

"All right." Sirius drew in another ragged breath.

"It's getting late. Shall we go back to the castle soon?" Remus asked, thinking Sirius might be looking for a way out of the conversation.

"Yes," Sirius said, but he made no move to get up. "There was another dream, too."

"Oh?"

"Well, not really a dream. More like a vision. I mean, it *was* a dream, but nothing happened in it. It was more of a feeling, an image..." He frowned. "It was nothing, really. It was just a doorway, with a sort of curtain hanging across it..."

"A veil?" Remus blurted before he could even think to stop himself. His heart leapt to his throat; ice shot through his veins.

"A veil... yeah, I guess you could call it that," Sirius said. He had a distant look on his face. "And for some reason, it just felt... familiar. Like maybe I've had that dream before, but I never remembered it when I woke up."

"Maybe," Remus said stiltedly. This couldn't be happening. "Maybe that's why, yes. Sirius, do you remember anything else?"

"No, that was all."

Remus studied his friend intently. It didn't sound like what had happened to himself, or Severus. It didn't sound like anything he could fathom. Still — he had to know for sure. He rapidly searched his mind for something he could say, some little inconspicuous codeword that he could use as a test. "Well," he said evenly, "It's best to put it behind you. It was only a dream. *I* had a dream that you were adopted as a pet by a family of muggles. Have you ever thought about what you might be called if you were someone's pet dog? I think Snuffles has a nice ring to it."

Sirius only looked at Remus like he had sprouted a second head. "What are you on about, Moony?"

"Nothing. Never mind," Remus said, growing flustered. "Must not have gotten enough sleep. Err, I mean I slept *too* much. Anyway, you should go, I must ring the bell before Poppy comes looking for me."

"Poppy...?"

Great. “Oh, erm, it’s this little quirk of mine, I call professors by their given names in my head, don’t know why actually, I should probably try and break the habit; anyway, off you go, I’ll see you in the afternoon!” Sirius looked bewildered as Remus practically shoved him out the door.

What the hell was THAT?

Unless Sirius had suddenly become a seer, something was terribly awry. This was unprecedented. Remus struggled to name what had just happened. It seemed less like time travel and more like time was bleeding through, seeping in at the corners of his friend’s consciousness.

No, not Time. Death.

How long had Sirius been having these visions? He’d said it felt familiar, but what did that *mean*? Had Remus done this, somehow? Had he brought this upon his friend? Had a little extra smudge of Time and Memory gotten stuck to his shoe when he travelled back and somehow attached itself to Sirius? It wasn’t as if he could question Sirius about it; not without raising any alarms. What was he going to say? *Good news, I know what your dream meant, and it wasn’t a nightmare after all; it was only a portent of your death!*

Somehow, he felt without a shadow of a doubt that he could not tell Severus about this development. Not yet. He tried to interrogate this feeling. It would feel like a betrayal of Sirius, laying him bare for dissection by a man who hated him and whom he hated in return. Sirius had told Remus about his dream in confidence; that didn’t change just because Remus knew something that Sirius did not. And then, what good could come of it? How could Remus speak of something that he was terrified to even consider?

Maybe he would only need to keep it secret until he’d figured out the meaning for himself. Maybe forever. Maybe God, Magic, Time, Death, or Whatever would be merciful, and they would all forget it had ever happened.

(In)constant

On a lazy Saturday morning in early April, everything took a turn. Remus and his friends were each lounging on their own beds, facing the middle of the room and chatting about inanities. Really, James was doing most of the chatting; he was full of energy, having already been out for a secret early-morning quidditch practice. Remus half-listened as he practiced his calligraphy in the margins of his Charms notes. Sirius was thumbing languidly through a catalogue of muggle farming equipment that had somehow come into his possession, and Peter, having just awoken, nodded sleepily along. "Look at the size of those tyres. I can't believe muggles really drive around in these things," Sirius remarked, apparently to himself.

"So, anyway, at practice this morning Casper Price offered to sell me another girlie magazine. He wants two galleons for it. It's a lot, but I don't know, he told me there's this Dutch woman in it who's got... you know... and there's this thingy... in the place where..." James trailed off awkwardly, having evidently realised mid-sentence that he had no idea what he was trying to describe.

Sirius snorted. "Wow. Sounds enthralling," he said.

"Shut up," James grumbled.

"No, really. I'm getting hot and bothered just thinking about the place with the stuff. Tell me

more.”

Their last little adventure with pornography had been a farcical charade of masculine bonding, with Peter pretending to be interested in women, Sirius pretending to be interested in porn, James pretending to be interested in anyone but Lily and Remus pretending to be even remotely interested in talking about sex acts with a bunch of eighteen-year-olds, best friends or not. Remus had been the first to break away, declaring the whole thing stupid and retreating to his bed.

“I can probably get one with blokes in it too next time,” James had offered magnanimously.

“We’re not discussing this,” Remus had rejoined, slamming his bed curtains shut; to which Sirius had loudly complained that if Remus was going to toss himself off right next to them, he ought to at least have the decency to wait until they were sleeping.

Now, James was pestering Sirius over whether he thought it was worth it to spend the two galleons.

“No, you twat,” Sirius said with exasperation. “Why not just wait until you’re out of school and can buy your own filth?”

“But that’s two months from now!” James whinged.

“Yeah,” Peter said, “and what else is he supposed to hide inside his books during N.E.W.T. revision sessions?”

A knock sounded against the door. “Hello lads, are you decent?” Lily called from the other side.

“Define ‘decent,’” Sirius called back.

Lily swung the door open. “Hiya. Hey, Remus. Are you free? Slughorn wants to talk to us about something. He asked me to fetch you.”

“On a Saturday?” Remus asked nervously.

“I know! Sorry, I’ve got no idea what it’s about either, but I’m dead curious.”

“Okay. Yeah. Give me a minute to make myself presentable and I’ll meet you down in the common room, all right?”

Half an hour later, Remus and Lily were seated in Professor Slughorn’s office while he busied himself preparing tea for Lily. Remus had accepted his initial offer of sherry; never mind that it was eleven o’clock in the morning. Having summoned them, Slughorn seemed reluctant to broach whatever it was he had to say. He spent at least a quarter-hour puttering about and making smalltalk before he finally got down to it.

“Evans. Lupin. You know that I’m very impressed with the work you’ve been doing, don’t you?” Slughorn asked.

“Thank you, sir,” Lily said.

“And I always like to support students conducting independent research; especially when a project has so much potential...” Remus swallowed, waiting for the ‘but.’ It took an awfully long time for Slughorn to get there, but eventually he said, “The Board of Governors seems to have caught wind of your research project.”

“Really? Why would the board care about our project?” Lily asked, bemused.

“Now, I’m not sure how the information travelled to them — most of them have ties to students at the school, of course, but I’m not here to assign blame — but, well, you see, the crux of the matter is, the board has raised some... concerns about the nature of your research.”

“Concerns?” Remus echoed.

“Some of them seem to feel that the subject matter is” — here his lip curled derisively, an expression that seemed out of place on his normally jovial face — “*inappropriate* for a student project.”

“Inappropriate?” Lily scoffed. “That’s completely ridiculous.”

“Yes, yes, well. The thing is, they’ve requested that I instruct you to cease your research.” Deep worry-lines showed on his brow.

Lily laughed in disbelief, but Remus had a feeling this was not a laughing matter. Slughorn certainly wasn’t smiling. “I imagine they made their request somewhat forcefully?” Remus asked quietly.

“Indeed, Lupin. I’m afraid my hands are rather tied.”

“That’s absurd!” Lily cried. “I mean — beg pardon, sir — but you’re not actually going to make us stop, are you? You know how important this project could be!”

“If it were up to me, Evans...” He sighed heavily. “That’s not all. The board has called a special meeting for this coming Friday. They would like the two of you to attend and answer a few questions about your research.”

Lily paled. “Are we in trouble, sir?” she asked. Remus felt queasy.

“No, no, nothing like that. Just a formality, I’m sure.”

“Do we have a choice in the matter, sir?” Remus asked.

Slughorn’s frown was answer enough. “The meeting is at three o’clock on Friday. I’ll be with you the entire time, of course.”

It was clear that Slughorn would brook no argument; or, more to the point, that he could not. Remus felt sick to his stomach. He tossed back the rest of his sherry. It didn’t help; it only cast a blanket of numb confusion over his internal turmoil. Remus wasn’t worried for himself; he’d faced bigoted bureaucrats before, and he knew the proper posture to adopt. But Lily! How could they put her through this? For all her wisdom and poise, she was scarcely more than a child. His heart ached. He thought distantly of Harry, forced to go up before the Wizengamot at fifteen. Remus had no doubt that Lily could take on the Board of Governors and do it with aplomb. But she shouldn’t have to. No child should. It was a wicked, rotten system that put the failings of adults onto the shoulders of children.

Lily told Severus, of course, and Severus in turn told Remus exactly what he thought of the whole affair. Eventually, though, they had settled on a pragmatic course of action; a sort of rehearsal to prepare for the board meeting. That was how Remus and Lily found themselves sitting in an empty

classroom on Sunday afternoon while Severus paced menacingly, cross-examining them like a prosecuting barrister. What is the name of the potion in question? What is its purpose? Where did you discover the recipe? That's rather obscure, isn't it? What did you hope to gain through your experimentation? Remus might have found Severus' play-acting endearing, if not for the gravity of the situation.

"You've been testing different iterations of the potion since January. Who are your subjects?"

"Myself," Lily said, "as well as two of my dorm mates who've agreed to help out."

"That's a rather small sample size."

"Yes, it certainly isn't up to the standards of a formal study, but our research is only very preliminary. We're still in school, after all," Lily said pointedly.

"So, under ideal circumstances, you would administer this potion to a larger number of people?"

"Well, yes, that's how clinical research typically works."

"And after the trial period? Do you believe this potion should be made generally available?"

"If it's effective, then yes, I think it should be something that everyone can access if they need it."

"I see." Severus shot her a scrutinising look, and for a moment, Remus forgot that it was only an act. "And who, in your opinion, might 'need' this potion?"

"Anyone who experiences disruption due to their menstrual cycle. Too long, short, frequent, infrequent, painful... I believe it has the potential to really improve quality of life for a lot of people."

"Indeed," Severus said, voice dripping with the sort of disdain that Remus remembered from years before. Remus couldn't help reflecting that he really would not have liked to be a student in Severus' class. "Let's move on to the recipe itself. Miss Evans. Are you aware of the traditional uses of tansy?"

"Of course. I *did* do a bit of reading before starting the project."

"Wrong answer," Severus said sharply. "Miss Evans, *are you aware* that tansy can be used as an abortifacient?"

"What do you want me to say? The potion is meant to regulate menstrual cycles. The tansy is almost certainly at too low a concentration — it's more symbolic than anything, from what I've deduced — but yes, as tansy can be used to stimulate menstruation, it follows that it can also disrupt pregnancy. That's not the purpose of this potion, though."

"Will you please just *lie about it*, Lily?" Severus snapped.

Lily's face became cold and hard as glazed porcelain. "Oh. Sure. 'No, sirs, I had *no* idea. I'm just a silly little *girl*, and those books are *ever* so full of big words.'"

"*DAMN IT*, Lily," Severus exploded, "can't you just shut up and keep your head down for *once*?"

"*All right*, Severus, that's enough!" Remus leapt from his seat. "Come with me," he said sternly, grabbing Severus and shepherding him out of the room. Remus looked back at Lily apologetically, but she was staring straight ahead at Severus. Straight *through* him.

Remus grasped Severus' shoulder firmly and steered him a few metres down the hall. After casting *Muffliato*, he growled, "Severus, normally I'd ask what the hell is going on with you, but I don't have to, because you're being painfully transparent. I *know* you're worried about Lily, but you do *not* get to take it out on her like that. Do you understand me?"

"Let go of me," Severus grumbled, not meeting Remus' eyes. He gave his shoulder an ineffectual little shrug, but Remus' grip didn't falter.

"Apologise to Lily. No, apologise *and* explain to her why you just yelled at her. Go now, don't wait, don't let it fester."

"Don't tell me what to do," Severus spat, sounding childish. Remus tried not to smirk in spite of himself. He let go of Severus.

"Fine. I won't tell you what to do. I'll just point out that I think you already know what to do. Don't walk away, Severus. That's not really what you want, is it?"

"I wish you wouldn't presume that you know what I want, Lupin," Severus said. Something about the way he phrased it struck Remus as funny; it was not an imperative, only a complaint — *I wish you wouldn't*. Severus sounded irritated, but not as angry as Remus expected. It put some of his fear to rest.

"You're right. I've said my part. I'm going to leave now. Whatever you do next is entirely up to you, Severus," Remus said, taking a broad step back.

"What? You can't just leave, we haven't finished — "

"I really don't think we'll be able to carry on productively this afternoon," Remus said. He moved away and began to walk down the hallway. "You and Lily know where to find me once you've got this sorted out."

"Damn it, Lupin!"

Remus turned back, smiled, and flashed a thumbs-up at Severus before rounding the corner.

Remus tried to interrogate the strange emotion he was experiencing. He was sad, yes, about Lily, and fearful for her. He was frustrated with Severus for losing his temper, though he recognised that was rather hypocritical of him. But there was something else, something new, not unwelcome but difficult to define. It was almost like faith. He'd felt no need to hover, to mediate, to take control of the situation other than giving Severus a gentle push in the right direction. What he felt was an utter conviction that Severus was going to do the right thing. Good God, it was *trust*. He trusted Severus Snape. Not merely with his life — that was easy enough, Remus had been doing it for years — but with his *feelings*. With his *friends'* feelings. Imagine that! For all that Remus was supposedly reliving the past, the surprises just would not stop coming.

The day of the trial — erm, board meeting — came all too soon, and yet not soon enough. Remus wore the new robes he'd received for Christmas and allowed Sirius to lend him a blue silk tie (though he drew the line at letting Sirius tie it for him). Remus sat by patiently while his three friends debated whether or not to slick his hair with a bit of the old-fashioned pomade still favoured by pureblood types, but ultimately (and to Remus' great relief) James won out with the argument

that leaving Remus' hair loose made him look more boyish and innocent. It was a reasonable calculation. Their unspoken goal was to make him look as sexless and nonthreatening as possible. Personally, Remus thought he didn't have to work too hard to achieve it.

They met Lily on their way to the common room, trussed up in a prim and conservative set of navy blue robes she had obviously borrowed from a taller friend. Lily didn't own any witches' robes, other than her requisite school robes; she'd never really taken to them. When Remus and Lily saw one another, they both burst out laughing. It helped to lighten the atmosphere for everyone else.

Severus was waiting to meet them down the hall. Accompanied by James and Severus, who were both too preoccupied with fussing over Lily to snipe at one another, Remus and Lily made their way down to a seldom-used conference room near the staffroom. (At least, Remus didn't remember anyone using the conference room during his tenure as a professor; their faculty meetings had always been rather informal.) It was only when they came to a halt near the entrance to the room that Remus staggered under a wave of anxiety.

"I'll be waiting just outside," James said, squeezing Lily's hand and Remus' shoulder.

"I will too," Severus said, seeming a bit annoyed at being preempted by James, "in a separate room."

"You don't have to — " Lily began.

"Thanks," Remus said, cutting her off. "I appreciate that." Lily nodded and offered them a plucky smile.

The conference room seemed to have been arranged for maximal intimidation. The board members all sat like a panel of judges on one side of a long table, though that was surely not the most effective layout for a meeting. Across from them — but distinctly not *at* the table — sat two empty chairs, angled toward the centre. Remus and Lily moved morosely over to them and took their places. Professors Slughorn, Sprout, and McGonagall were all present as well, seated on the same side of the panel as Lily and Remus.

Remus quickly sized up the Board of Governors. They were all old enough to have children or grandchildren at the school, but for one harried young man who was almost certainly related to the Blacks. There was only one woman on the board, and she looked to be about a hundred-and-ten. Remus and Lily exchanged a glance; he could tell she was thinking the same thing.

At the centre of the table sat the chairman, who, in keeping with tradition, quite literally had a grander chair than the other members of the board. He also possessed a ridiculous silver-handled gavel; Remus was certain that were he to inspect it up close, he would find the chairman's name engraved into the silver. Not that he needed to go to such lengths. The identity of the chairman was more or less written across his face: Abraxas Malfoy. The man bore a striking resemblance to his only grandson.

"Mr. Lupin. Miss Evans," Malfoy greeted them succinctly. "Thank you for joining us today."

"It's our pleasure," Remus said reflexively. He heard Lily snort beside him.

"We've called you in to ask a few routine questions about the research you've been conducting for your N.E.W.T.-level Potions course." Malfoy nodded in acknowledgment to Professor Slughorn. "Please, if you will, begin by telling us the name of the potion you've been working on."

He addressed his words to Remus (sexist prick), but Lily answered anyway. "It's a medicinal

potion from the late nineteenth century known as the Inconstant Moon Elixir. We're working on variations in order to determine if we can make a simpler and more accessible version of the recipe."

"Thank you. And how long have you been working on this project?"

"We began our preliminary research back in December," Lily said.

"I see. And this potion is primarily used for the purpose of contraception, is it not?"

Remus' stomach dropped. Lily gaped.

"Oh, excuse me. I believe the muggles sometimes call it 'birth control,'" Malfoy added condescendingly. As if his choice of vocabulary had been the issue.

"The purpose of the potion," Lily said, in pitch-perfect imitation of Malfoy's condescension, "is to regulate the menstrual cycle. It's designed for people who experience severe symptoms or irregular bleeding."

"Please excuse me, but what does it matter if a girl's monthlies are regular, unless she's concerned about getting in trouble?" This question was posed by the lone, ancient female member of the board. It was a clever (if transparent) strategy.

"Miss Evans has already stated that the potion can be used to manage severe symptoms associated with menstruation. Would you like me to enumerate those symptoms for you? I'd be happy to provide more details," Minerva offered.

"That won't be necessary," Malfoy said quickly. "I believe that the potion contains common tansy, which is used to induce menstruation?"

"Tansy is an ingredient with *many* useful applications," Slughorn broke in. "I use it in a variety of potions myself."

"Yes," the youngish man said impatiently, "but one of its best-known uses is... inducing menstruation. In other words, it may be used as an emergency contraceptive. Is that not so?"

There was a beat of tense silence, during which Remus fervently hoped that one of the professors would speak up before Lily did. No such luck. "Naturally," Lily said, "anything that triggers menstruation will preclude any possibility of pregnancy. That's not the potion's intended use, though."

"Naturally," Malfoy echoed with distaste. Turning to Professor Slughorn, he asked, "This potion is not a part of the regular curriculum here at Hogwarts, is it?"

"No," Slughorn said, "but I'm always happy to encourage students who want to take on independent projects. Miss Evans and Mr. Lupin are two of my most talented students," he added proudly. Although this was neither the time nor the place to gloat, Remus felt a slight flush of pleasure. He always was a glutton for praise.

The board spent a few minutes questioning Professors Sprout and Slughorn about the supplies they kept on hand, their N.E.W.T.-level curricula, and so on. Then Malfoy turned abruptly back to Lily. "Miss Evans, I believe you've been testing the potion on yourself?"

"Yes," Lily confirmed. "I've taken it three times since January. If I may, I've already noticed a difference in my level of pain with menses," she said.

"I see." Malfoy paused, as if to let that information sink in. "And, Miss Evans, is it not true that you have been... courting with a young man in your House?"

All three professors erupted at once, but Minerva's voice rang out above them: "That is a completely irrelevant and inappropriate line of questioning. Miss Evans, you don't have to answer that."

Lily was red in the face. She obviously hadn't foreseen that question. Neither had Remus. "Of course," Malfoy said smoothly, "I beg your pardon. I was simply trying to gain a fuller understanding of the situation."

"By the way," said an old man who had been quiet until that moment, "do give my regards to young James Potter. I shared a dorm with his grandfather, back in the day. I always like to see a fellow Gryffindor succeed." He spoke with a genial tone and a malicious glint in his eye.

"Indeed," Malfoy said with distaste. "It has been some time since Gryffindor could boast both Head Boy and Head Girl. You must be *so* proud. Mr. Lupin, Miss Evans, I suppose the two of you must spend quite a lot of time together? Between your classes, Head duties, and now this research project." Malfoy had switched from stiff formality to a more conversational mode. Suddenly, the discussion felt far more dangerous.

"That's right," Remus said with practiced neutrality. His voice felt gravelly, and he was painfully aware that it was the first time he'd spoken up since the questioning began.

"I understand that the two of you are *very* devoted to your studies. In fact, it's been reported that you're *frequently* seen coming and going from one another's dormitories."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

The elderly witch gasped. "Surely you misspoke, Abraxas. A *man* visiting the girls' dormitories? Is that sort of thing permitted in Gryffindor?" Funny how, suddenly, Lily and her cohort were *girls* and Remus was a *man*.

"Not in my day, it wasn't," the Fellow Gryffindor said.

"Ah, but I'd forgotten, not all of you served on the board at the time," Malfoy addressed his colleagues. "I was new to the board myself, back then. In 1969, Hogwarts administration reversed the spell preventing male students from entering female dormitories, which had been in place since the time of the Founders." It was clear from the way he spoke that Malfoy held the *time of the Founders* to be sacrosanct.

"We did so with the approval of the Board of Governors, of course," Minerva said tartly, "as is required for any major decision affecting the magic of the castle."

"Yes, I remember. Perhaps now is the proper time to raise the issue once again, now that the little experiment has gone on for nearly a decade. The current board has raised serious concerns about the safety of our young ladies here at Hogwarts."

Minerva remained unruffled. "The safety and privacy of our student residents is our foremost priority. Students are, of course, able to lock their doors against anyone they choose," she clarified. "In fact, the new system was explicitly designed to improve the security of the dormitories. With the exception of our school healer, Madame Pomfrey, even faculty are only granted access in emergency situations."

"If safety and privacy are your concern, why revoke the magic that has kept young ladies safe

since the time of the Founders?”

“Hogwarts has merely followed an increasing trend towards co-education in schools and universities throughout the United Kingdom,” Minerva stated. “In fact, most experts these days agree that it is beneficial for — ”

“*Muggle* schools,” the lone witch on the board cut in venomously. “And a few vulgar establishments of so-called ‘higher learning’ like Cambridge, Oxford, and — Merlin help us all — the *Scottish universities*. I hardly see why we should follow *their* lead.”

Minerva pursed her lips while Remus and Lily, despite the seriousness of the situation, struggled not to laugh. Minerva had been at Edinburgh before she came to teach at Hogwarts, and it didn’t take much plying to get her waxing rhapsodical about her personal heroes, the Edinburgh Seven.

Another member of the board cleared his throat. “Now, now. I’m a Cambridge man myself” — he ignored the disapproving stares of his colleagues, most of whom considered a muggle university degree to be a badge of shame — “but back in my day, the men had their colleges and the ladies had theirs. We chaps would have gotten in real trouble if we were ever caught in one of the women’s colleges. I should know; I had a few narrow escapes myself,” he chortled. A couple of the other men joined in. “Now, are you telling me that if *my* granddaughter were sharing a dorm with some trollop who lets in gentlemen callers at any and all hours, she would just have to put up with it? The very idea is appalling.”

“It certainly is,” Slughorn broke in placatingly. He knew how to speak this man’s language. “Certainly. By the way, I spent a few months at Cambridge myself, back in my youth. The stories I could tell... I was there around the time Christopher Isherwood was sent down, you know. But in any case, unlike the muggles, we have magical reinforcements here at Hogwarts. No one can enter one of our dormitories without the common consent of all occupants.”

“Be that as it may,” Abraxas Malfoy said, regarding Slughorn with marginally more toleration than he had Minerva, “it seems quite senseless to me to place our trust in the *common consent* of adolescent girls. Unfortunately, as we all know, young ladies can be far too easily swayed. It is *our* duty, as responsible adults, to protect their purity.”

Remus shivered. He was sure that no one in the room had missed the layered meanings of the word *purity*.

“Excuse me, sirs,” Lily piped up. Remus’ stomach clenched. “But girls have always been able to enter the boys’ dorms, ever since *the time of the Founders*. Don’t the new locking charms that replaced the magic staircases just ensure that boys are entitled to the same level of privacy?”

Malfoy scowled. “Yes, well, in the old days, if a girl made the unwise decision to enter the boys’ rooms, at least she couldn’t drag down the rest of her dorm mates with her.” He looked piercingly at Lily.

The Cambridge Man cleared his throat again. “I quite agree. The enchanted staircases provide much better security for our young ladies. Why fix what isn’t broken?”

“Please tell me,” Lily interjected, “how exactly are the staircases meant to decide who’s a boy and who’s a girl? Are they charmed to peek up our robes as we go up and down?”

All eyes were on Lily now in a moment of stunned speechlessness. Then the junior member cried out, “How can they *tell*? What an absolutely preposterous question!” He let out a series of blustering huffs that were meant to approximate a laugh.

“Indeed,” said Malfoy wryly. “I don’t believe the castle ever made any mistakes on that count.”

Lily shrugged defiantly. “Only, if it’s been there for a thousand years, the castle’s magic probably isn’t up-to-date with the latest research on sex and gender roles — ”

She was drowned out by the furious banging of Malfoy’s gavel. “Enough! This esteemed body does not entertain crackpot theories derived from pornographic muggle literature,” he shouted over the sound and fury that he himself had generated.

“Really, now! Pornog — ” Minerva cried out, but she was interrupted again.

“The writings of delusional muggle radicals will never have any place here at Hogwarts. The castle knows best. The Founders know best. *Magic* knows best,” Malfoy declared.

From there, the board retreated to deliberate in private; or, more accurately, they conjured a soundproof curtain around their table. As they had not been given permission to leave, Remus and Lily sat in uncomfortable silence while they waited. At last, the curtain vanished, and Malfoy called the assembled party to attention with the sound of his gavel — rather unnecessarily, as the room was already dead silent.

“I thank you all for your patience. The board has come to a series of decisions based on our discussion today. Madame Deputy Headmistress, if you would please take note and pass our recommendations along to Headmaster Dumbledore.”

“With pleasure,” Minerva said acidly.

Ignoring the obvious displeasure of all three professors, Malfoy continued. “First, Miss Evans and Mr. Lupin will immediately cease their current project. Any reference to the so-called ‘Inconstant Moon Elixir’ will be expunged from the curriculum, along with all other potions designed to disrupt the natural reproductive cycle. We will instruct the librarian to transfer any texts dealing with this subject to the Restricted Section.”

“Not like we could find any to begin with...” Lily muttered.

“*Second*,” Malfoy enunciated aggressively, “henceforth, common tansy will no longer be grown on Hogwarts school grounds.”

Professors Slughorn and Sprout both broke out in protest at the same time.

“It’s a necessary ingredient for *several* kinds of potions — ”

“Might as well ban all Herbology; we grow plenty of plants more dangerous than tansy and yet we seem to manage — ”

Malfoy slammed his gavel to call them to order. “*Third*. Hogwarts faculty will reconstruct the original charm placed on the dormitories by the Founders in order to protect the purity of our young ladies.” He uttered this commandment with particular venom. “The spellwork is to be completed by the first of September, before next year’s students return to school.” All three professors looked murderous by this point. “Fourth and finally, the Board of Governors will conduct a thorough review of the school’s curricula over the course of the year to come, to ensure that the knowledge imparted to students within these hallowed halls is accurate and *appropriate* to their needs.”

Remus felt ill. He knew how this went. The subtext of Malfoy’s speech was loud and clear. Protecting the purity — read: virginity — of young women was an easy enough cause to rally

families and donors around. From there, it was a simple segue into protecting the purity of young women's *bloodlines*. Remus didn't believe for a second that the Board of Governors cared about students' health and safety. 'Purity' was a commodity, an asset in the pureblood marriage market, plain and simple. More than that, it was a useful Sword of Damocles to dangle over the heads of reluctant adherents. *Trust us. We're the ones who keep your children safe.*

There's a world of difference between a door that locks from inside and one that locks from without. Remus had been locked into enough rooms in his lifetime to know. Take away the students' locks, replace them with the supposedly omniscient magic of the castle, tell them that magic can keep them safer than their own flawed judgment; ignore the reality that spells are created by people, people who are very much not omniscient or impartial. The truth is that a *safe* place controlled from outside is never really safe for the people within.

All of this had happened before. By the time Remus had returned to teach at Hogwarts, the old regulations were firmly back in place. But as he recalled, the reactionary rules had been enacted a few years after he'd left school — after the war, when the pureblood old guard was scrambling to maintain some semblance of power. Severus probably remembered it more precisely. But whenever the changes had come, one thing was certain: Lily Evans and Remus Lupin had not been the catalysts.

What was Remus to make of it all? Had he been going about things all wrong? He'd tried to keep the past unchanged, and had instead watched it spin wildly out of his control. And yet with the potion, he *had* tried to do something differently — something he'd thought would be small, yet useful — and, to all appearances, he had only succeeded in hastening the inevitable.

Inevitable. Remus didn't really believe in inevitability. He never had, and the past two years had only confirmed his belief in the absolute contingency of events. Had he believed in destiny, he might have enjoyed a much more relaxing sojourn in the past. Now he felt a tiny flicker of doubt. Perhaps he had overestimated his own importance. What if certain things were just... *predestined* to happen, no matter *what* he did?

That was an avenue of thought Remus preferred to avoid.

Lily kicked him in the shin, breaking him out of his spiralling thoughts. "Are you still with us, Mr. Lupin?" Malfoy asked sneeringly.

"Yes, sir," Remus said, a bit too fervid in his effort to sound sincere.

"I will leave you with a reminder that, as Head Boy and Head Girl, the two of you have a duty to uphold the honour and reputation of this school, and to serve as role models to the rest of the student body. Thank you for your time today. You are dismissed."

Remus and Lily left the room as quickly as they could. As soon as they were out of earshot, Remus hissed, "God, Lily, I'm so sorry. What a disgusting insinuation..."

"I know!" Lily whispered back. "As if you'd *ever* have a chance with me." She grinned, and Remus gave her a playful little swat.

Almost immediately, James and Severus were upon them. Apparently having forgotten to feel awkward around each other for the moment, they both closed in on Lily. "How did it go?" James asked anxiously.

Lily was trembling, but she adopted a blithe and breezy tone. "I think I might be on some sort of watchlist now," she said. "Apparently I'm a dangerous — no, what was it? — a *delusional* muggle

radical.”

“Don’t forget pornographer,” Remus pitched in.

“Oh. Yes. Mustn’t forget that.” Lily dissolved into laughter, followed by Remus shortly after. James and Severus both seemed at a loss, and seeing the two of them stunned silent for once made Remus laugh even harder.

“I take it you didn’t heed my advice,” Severus said flatly; but his voice was tinged with affection. Remus could recognise that, now.

“When do I ever?” Lily retorted, squeezing Severus’ arm.

James wrapped an arm around Lily’s waist and pulled her close. “I love you, you know,” he whispered into her hair, not quite softly enough to go unheard by Remus and Severus. Lily’s face lit up, and Remus’ heart fluttered with happiness. Lily reached out to Remus, pulling him into the embrace, and then Severus somehow got dragged in too, and sweet Jesus, Remus was having a group hug with Lily Evans, *James Potter* and *Severus bloody Snape*. This was beyond belief.

The moment was short-lived. They broke apart at the guttural sound of a cleared throat. Remus feared it would be one of the board members, but it was only Professor Slughorn. “Miss Evans,” he said in the gentle tone he seemed to reserve exclusively for her, “after the discussion we’ve just had, you may not want the Board of Governors to walk out and see you embracing three of your male classmates...”

Lily looked embarrassed for the first time all day. “Sorry, Professor!”

“Sorry?” Slughorn shook his head. “Doesn’t bother *me* in the slightest. I’m glad your friends came to support you. We all need friends we can count on, especially in times like these.” Ominous. In a low voice, he added, “Listen to me, Evans, don’t take a word of what those old codgers said to heart. The sooner they’re all off the board and replaced with people like you, the better.” With that, he took leave of them.

It was the closest Remus had ever heard his old Potions professor come to speaking up against authority, albeit behind closed doors. Remus felt a surprising surge of affection for him.

“I’ve been saying it for years,” Lily said, as if she had read Remus’ mind. “He’s an odd one, old Sluggy, but he’s a stand-up gent when it comes right down to it.” James and Severus both rolled their eyes to varying degrees.

“He’s right, too,” James said. “We should make ourselves scarce.”

The four of them hurried away in no particular direction, coming to a stop near the front entrance hall. Only then, when it came time to go their separate ways, did the tension between James and Severus set back in. It was clear they both wanted to keep speaking to Lily. “I think I need to walk off my nerves. Severus, care to join me?” Remus asked. What he really wanted was a soak in the tub followed by a long nap, but he couldn’t stand the thought of Severus going off on his own while Remus, Lily and James all went back to Gryffindor together.

“I suppose,” Severus said. They bade Lily goodbye and made for the entryway. Outside the wind was biting, but the sky was bright, patterned with cirrocumulus clouds that looked like April lambs cavorting across a blue field. The fruit trees across the grounds had recently erupted into bloom, and a riot of daffodils sprung up around the foundations of the castle. The lawn was scattered all over with daisies and dandelions. Remus inhaled deeply. The chill air burned his lungs while the

sun warmed his face.

“What is it, Lupin?” Severus asked, bursting Remus’ momentary bubble of contentment.

“What is what?”

“What did you want to tell me?”

Remus blinked. “What do you mean?”

Severus huffed in frustration. “If you didn’t have something to tell me, why are we standing out here, Lupin?”

“Oh. No reason. I just wanted your company, that’s all.” Remus was tickled by Severus’ incredulous expression. “What? Can’t you and I spend time together without researching or plotting something?”

“Sure,” Severus said. “Sometimes, we try to kill each other, too.”

They shared a wry smile, and Remus felt as if something lifted between them. The old barriers were eroding as Remus and Severus were pushed helplessly toward one another, driven by the powerful absurdity of their lives.

Soon Remus would have to tell Severus everything that had transpired after he and Lily went into that room. Severus would probably have a fit, but it was a *fait accompli* now. Given that the board had come into it already dead set against them, Remus was immensely proud of Lily for holding her own, and deep down he thought that Severus would be too. Remus brushed his fingers shyly against Severus’. Something about that delicate touch felt far more intimate than kissing. “Lily was brilliant back there,” Remus said. “I know it must have been awful to wait outside that room. I know you wanted to protect her, I know, and so did I, but she wouldn’t be Lily if she didn’t stand up to them...”

“I’ve no doubt she *was* brilliant, but can’t you see how dangerous it is to draw that kind of attention — that level of scrutiny? To be known by name *and reputation* to the likes of Abraxas Malfoy?”

“If you recall, Lily was somewhat notorious the first time we had this war, too.”

“That’s not all. There were at least two confirmed Death Eaters in that room with you.”

Remus shuddered, feeling chastened. “I’m sorry. This is my fault. I dragged Lily into this mess. I never should have...”

“Stupid,” Severus hissed, seizing Remus’ hand and squeezing with surprising force. “You think Lily is the only one I’m worried about?”

Remus’ heart skipped a beat. He stared down at his hand, crushed between Severus’ unyielding fingers. Their hands were unlovely, tense, mashed together incongruously just like the people they belonged to. “I did think that,” Remus murmured. “But I guess I don’t anymore.”

Moony

“You’re not going to hurt anyone, Moony. I know you.”

“You can’t say that. You can’t be sure, not ever. I need you to understand. It’s my greatest fear. I would rather die than attack another person. Do you understand me? I would rather die.”

“All right, all right, yes, I understand. Come on, let’s not talk about this here...”

“Stay with me tonight?”

“Always do, don’t I?...”

“...Promise me?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Until I wake up in the morning?”

Remus woke up disoriented. He stared blearily up at his blacklight painting and his broken-legged goose. It had been a dream of a dream. No — not a dream. That’s right, he had only *thought* it was a dream at the time, but it had turned out to be real. It was all so very, very real...

He checked his diary, though he really didn’t need to. He knew very well that it was the full moon. There was something else, though; something not written in the pages, but imprinted in his memory. It would be Teddy’s birthday tomorrow, the third since Remus had woken into this long, long not-a-dream. He thought dimly of last year, when he had commemorated his child’s birth alone in the Shrieking Shack. Remus felt like he had aged ten years since then. He would be in the Shack again tonight, whether he wanted to or not. This time, though...

“I don’t want to be alone tonight,” Remus told his friends. It was a gorgeous Saturday in April, and they were making the most of it, sprawling out on the lawn. Sirius and James were racing to see who could make the longest daisy chain. They were all young men now, eighteen years old; the age at which childish things cease to be tedious and instead become treasured once again. Treasured, and clung to like a lifeline.

"Of course you won't be alone," James said, bemused.

"I mean, I don't want to be alone when I wake up. Please. Will you all stay?"

"Sure," Sirius said. "It's the weekend. We can all have a lie-in." He stretched, and his back made a series of appalling popping noises. "I love it when full moon comes on a Saturday."

"It's preferable," Remus admitted. "Wouldn't say I *love* it."

"Right. Sorry." Sirius had the decency to look abashed.

"Maybe we can sneak into Hogsmeade after?" James suggested.

"That sounds fun. You do that, while I lie in the Hospital Wing feeling sorry for myself," Remus pouted.

"So, we could go today instead," James said.

Peter perked up. "Yes! We can get a mountain of sweets and have them for breakfast tomorrow."

"You know," Remus speculated, "I wouldn't be surprised if Honeydukes has photos of all of us spellotaped to the till, with a note to contact the school if we ever come in without permission slips..."

"Do they really do that?" James considered for a moment, then shrugged. "Doesn't matter. We're their favourite customers. Hey, maybe Lily will want to come along!" he added.

"No way," Sirius said sternly. "No telling Lily about secret passageways or any other mischief-makers' appurtenances until after graduation, remember?"

"Yes," Peter agreed, "it's a conflict of interest for our Head Girl to know about such illicit matters."

"I'm Head Boy," Remus pointed out. All three of his friends looked at him indulgently.

"Yeah," Sirius said, "but you're not Head Boy in the same way that Lily is Head Girl."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means Lily actually takes her job seriously," Peter said.

"Oi!" Remus grinned. "I can start deducting more points from you, if that's what you really want."

"House points don't matter, anyway," James said haughtily. "It's not as if they'll affect our lives at all once we're out of here for good."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for demoralising cynicism," Remus said.

"What? No! That's not fair!" James cried.

"And one hundred points to Gryffindor because Peter's looking very sharp today."

"My God, he's gone mad with power," Sirius laughed.

"Can you do that?" Peter asked nervously. "Won't the professors... know, somehow?"

"Guess we'll find out," Remus said with a shrug. "Two hundred points to Gryffindor for an

incisive and thought-provoking question.”

“Moony!”

“And one hundred and seventy-five points to Hufflepuff, just to show I’m not playing favourites.” That one was for Tonks, who’d once sworn to him that Teddy’s hair had turned yellow and black as soon as Remus wasn’t watching. James and Peter looked anxious beneath their smiles, but Sirius was in stitches. Remus laughed until his sides began to ache. He had always wanted to try that, first as a prefect and then as a professor, just to see what would happen. Why not now? What did it matter, anymore? The world around him was simply too ridiculous not to take advantage of it every now and then.

Remus was still in surprisingly high spirits that evening when he met up with Severus to take his last dose of Wolfsbane. Severus regarded him with suspicion. “You haven’t been drinking, have you? You *know* that will counteract the potion.”

“No! Severus, I’m starting to get the feeling you think I’m a total lush.”

“Aren’t you?” Severus asked, handing Remus his teacup.

“Not until I’m older!” Remus looked disdainfully into the cup and then knocked back the potion in one go.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Severus observed.

“I don’t know if I would call it ‘good,’ but I’m trying to make the best of it. This is a holiday of sorts. Tomorrow is Teddy’s birthday,” Remus explained.

Severus stilled. His expression was preternaturally neutral. “And that makes you feel...?” he prompted. Bless him, he was trying.

“It makes me feel everything at once,” Remus said. “But I can’t do anything about it, just like I can’t do anything about... this.” He gestured at the empty teacup. “The best I can do is seize any small happiness I can get and hold on tight. Speaking of which...” He wrapped his arms around Severus’ shoulders and pulled him in for a kiss. Severus’ eyes fluttered shut for a moment, but when Remus tried to coax his lips apart, he pulled away with a grimace.

“I’d rather you not stick your tongue in my mouth right after taking the Wolfsbane, thank you,” he said.

“Ha! I told you it tastes foul, didn’t I? Bet you thought I was exaggerating.”

“Not exaggerating. Just whinging.” He kissed Remus again, keeping his lips carefully closed this time.

“Mm. Two hundred and fifty points to Slytherin for being a good kisser,” Remus murmured.

“You can’t do that!” Severus exclaimed. Remus found his consternation rather comical.

“I just did, didn’t I?”

“That won’t go unnoticed for very long,” Severus said.

“Well, when I get caught, I’ll just say you made me do it. Ooh! Maybe we’ll get detention together!” Remus grinned.

“Miscreant,” Severus whispered, cupping Remus’ face and running his thumb over Remus’ lips.

“I’m incorrigible,” Remus agreed. He kissed the thumb and backed off. “I really have to go now, or I’ll get a lecture from Poppy.”

“You don’t want to make her angry,” Severus agreed.

“Good night, Severus. I’ll see you when I’m all put back together again.”

“Go,” Severus said, with a faint look of concern that made Remus melt like soft wax. He went.

Night. The wolf stretched out long, his body flooding with relief as the pain of transformation ebbed away. He took a turn about the room, greeted his friends, took in the scents — spent an especially long time sniffing around a stain of stale dog urine that the humans hadn’t quite managed to expunge from the porous wood floor — his friend understood right away, and looked contrite — the wolf wanted to mark the spot, cover it up with his own scent, but the human that lived in his mind gave him a stern talking-to, and he reluctantly backed off. He was anxious to get outside. Tonight, he would run.

The earth was spongy underneath him, and the pine needles clung and tickled his paws. The wolf wasn’t fussy about a little mess. It seemed to slick right off him as he ran, and he and the stag made a game of spattering each other with mud, seeing who could kick the highest. The stag won on that count, but the wolf was faster. He could outrun all of them, though out of courtesy, he stopped every so often to let them catch up. It was lonely without them, and no fun at all.

The night air was clear. He watched Mercury, Mars and Venus emerge; later, the Seven Stars and red Betelgeuse. The Dog Star was just out of sight until morning, its diamond-bright light hidden beyond the curve of the horizon. Just so, his black-furred friend was shadowed by the black of night; but the wolf knew he was there by his scent and the gentle wet sound of his breathing. The wolf could scent the rat, too, nestled somewhere in his friend’s thick fur, near invisible unless you knew to search him out. Only the stag stood out in the darkness, luminous, his antlers like branches of silver birch. The wolf nuzzled into his soft pelt, then let out a tremendous sneeze; the stag was going through his springtime moult. As it turned out, the human had been right about slimy werewolf snot. Not very cute.

Would he ever run like this with his cub? There had been no full moon between his son’s birth and the night he’d left his body. He didn’t even know if his son was a wolf, too. Distantly, he knew that his human mind didn’t want that kind of life for his child. The wolf felt differently. The wolf wanted to show his cub the forest, teach him its ins and outs, teach him to love the smell of pine and soil after rain, and how to run until his feet felt like nothing and he was flying through the night like a gale of wind. How to howl at the life-giving moon. It all became so clear when he was a wolf: the moon did not reign over him; it was his friend and his pilot. His human mind had such funny notions. Why was the human so afraid all the time? The wolf could not remember.

As the hours wore on Ursa Minor, the little cub, rotated around Polaris, its tail; Ursa Major curled protectively around it. The wolf chased Polaris for as long as he could: north, north, north. Everything made sense to him when he was running through the forest. He remembered who he was. The human had it all wrong. He was not a killer; he was a protector, like his beloved, the moon. At last, he understood his purpose. He knew what he had to do. He pointed his nose to the

heavens and howled his promise to the North Star.

The one with the title in it

The days were no longer so repetitive, but the hours were; hours of anxiety and hours of calm. Hours of watching his friends revise for their N.E.W.T. exams, during which Remus could barely even pretend to be making an effort. Hours of working with Severus in the library, using their privileges as N.E.W.T.-level Defence students to request tomes from the Restricted Section, and simply sneaking in whenever that fell through. And every so often, here and there, an hour spent loitering with Severus under the girthy old yew that Remus had come to think of as 'their' tree.

They rested their spines against the rough bark, conforming to its shape the way that water flows into a vessel, their posture entirely at the whim of the twists, knots and hollows that patterned the venerable trunk. Today the yew seemed to draw them closer together, ever so slightly angling them toward one another so that they couldn't help making eye contact more often than usual.

"Do you know what day it is?" Remus asked, apropos of nothing except his own private train of thought.

Severus frowned. "I was thinking about that. Wasn't the battle at Hogwarts around this date? I haven't bothered to remember the exact anniversary. I was rather preoccupied at the time."

"Oh. I suppose it was, but no, that's not it. It's my mother's birthday. She's fifty today."

"Why would I know that, Lupin?"

"Rhetorical question." Remus shrugged. "I just wish I could've gone home to celebrate with her. We usually have a rhubarb crumble, since rhubarb's in season. When I was a child, Dad and I would make it for her every year, and every year she'd act surprised." Remus closed his eyes. They'd had rhubarb crumble at supper a few nights ago, and he had nearly gotten weepy over it. Today he was even worse. He had, in fact, written to his parents a month ago, and again last week, asking them to come to Hogsmeade for the weekend. They'd never responded to his request; their reply letters made no mention of visiting. Remus was confused and hurt, but he tried to take it in stride.

"You're very close to your mother," Severus stated.

"What makes you say that?" Remus asked, taken aback.

"Well, apart from the fact that your Patronus represents your mother, you smell your mother's

perfume in Amortentia, and you carry around a card from your mother in your pocket at all times — ”

“Have you been rifling through my pockets?!”

“ — there’s also that glassy-eyed look you get every time you mention her.”

Remus felt weak. There was a lot to process in Severus’ words, not least the fact that Severus had been paying such close attention to him. And that bit about his Patronus — Remus would definitely have to come back to that — he’d never thought of it in those terms before, but it did make a certain sense. For now, though, all he could manage was a “yes.” His voice wavered, betraying him. “We were very close.”

Severus nodded. If he noticed Remus’ use of the past tense, he didn’t comment on it.

“This is her last birthday,” Remus added quietly.

Severus studied Remus for a long moment. Remus found himself unable to meet his eyes, afraid of what he might see in them. Or afraid of what he might give away. Finally Severus said, “I’m sorry.” Two words, so compassionate, so unexpected, they sliced clean through the Gordian knot of Remus’ emotions and opened the citadel gates.

“It’s my fault,” Remus whispered, surprising himself.

Severus tensed. “What?” he asked.

“I said it’s my fault,” Remus repeated a little louder. “It wasn’t easy, having a werewolf child. My family had to move around a lot, keep ourselves isolated. My mum had to give up her work. She had a job she loved, hobbies, friends, a community — then I was bitten, and she had to leave it all behind, and most of the time it was just the two of us while my dad was off working. I suppose it was a little bit his fault, too; if she’d never met him, she wouldn’t even know about magic or wizards or werewolves — she could have just lived a normal, happy life. I know she loved us, but loving us meant sacrificing so many of the things that made her whole. She loved me, but you can’t live for one person alone, no matter how much — ”

“Lupin!” Severus’ voice struck him like a slap to the face. Remus turned to him, dazed. Anger shone in Severus’ dark eyes. “Get over yourself,” he barked. “Not everything is about you.”

The words were harsh; an outside observer might even call them cruel. Remus felt instinctively as though he should fight back, and yet he also felt no desire to do so. Somehow, it was exactly what Remus needed to hear. He slumped, as if the muscles in his back had turned to jelly.

How did Severus know? How was it that he seemed to intuit what Remus needed when he could hardly fathom it himself? Thirty years spent honing his ability to get under Remus’ skin had turned out to be an unexpected boon. Yet even now, Remus could not bring himself to voice the question he had kept close to his heart for two decades: why, then?

Why, if not because of me?

They sat together in silence for five minutes, or half an hour; it was hard to say. Then Severus, grown gentle, asked: “Was it an accident?”

Remus drew in a sharp hiss of air. He considered his answer. “She didn’t leave a note, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said. “The coroner ruled it an accidental overdose.”

"I'm sorry," Severus said again. Twice in one day. It was revelatory.

"It happened on a new moon," Remus explained. "I always thought... I thought she wouldn't want me to find out while I was already ill from the moon. She was thoughtful like that."

"Ah," was Severus' only reply.

"Severus," Remus began. His heart rate picked up. "I'm going to tell you something, and I don't think you're going to like it at all, but please, I ask you, don't lash out at me." Severus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. "I want to go to her. That night, I want to be there. If I'm there... if I'm there with her, things will be different."

Severus, to his credit, did not lash out. Instead, his expression was entirely unreadable.

"She's a muggle. It won't change anything world-important," Remus continued almost pleadingly, "but it will make all the difference in the world to me. To my family."

"I understand," Severus said softly. "You want to know for certain."

Remus felt a surge of anger. Of all things! — God, why had he ever thought to confide in Severus Snape? "That's not the only the reason!" he cried.

"I didn't say it was the *only* reason," Severus said, still calm.

Just as quickly as it had flared, Remus' anger flickered out. "Oh," he said. "No, I suppose you didn't."

Severus took Remus' hand, and Remus melted the way he always did when Severus reached out for him.

"Remus... you must know that even if you change something, there's no guarantee the alternative will be better. We lead dangerous lives..."

"Yes, I know, but — "

"The Dark Lord may not know who you are yet — although after that little stunt with the Board of Governors, it's a possibility — but he certainly will in the future. There will come a time when he takes a very particular interest in you..."

"I know. And I'm prepared for that. More prepared than ever, one might say."

"And do you think the Dark Lord will simply overlook the fact that you have a muggle mother? Do you really think you can keep her safe if he decides to... to use her to get to you?"

Remus stared at Severus, astonished. He felt as if he were looking at a stranger. Or — no — rather, he felt like he was looking at Severus Snape, ten or twenty years in the past; a man he could neither comprehend nor communicate with. "Severus, that's a horrible thing to say. Do you hear yourself? Are you really telling me I shouldn't try to save her, just because... Severus! Do you actually believe it's better if the people you love die, so they can't be... I don't know, a *liability*...?" Remus was gripping Severus' hand like a vice now, digging in his nails as if to hold him and hurt him at the same time.

"No," Severus rasped. "I don't believe that. The liability is loving anyone in the first place."

Severus went very still. A look of horror crossed his features. He clearly had not planned on saying

that. If anything, he looked more shocked than Remus felt.

Remus was torn to shreds, sorrow and compassion and anger warring within him. “Well, I’m not concerned about myself,” he said. “I would gladly die to keep my mother safe, or anyone else.”

This seemed to shake Severus out of his stupor. “Remus,” he said, “you know that’s not an option. The Order needs you. Harry Potter needs you. Your ch — Teddy needs you.” *I need you*, Remus waited for him to say, but the words went unspoken. “And I don’t know your mother, but if she’s anything like you describe, I imagine she’d tell you the same thing.” It was a warning that sounded oddly like a motivational speech; or was it the other way around?

Severus was right, of course. Damn him. To Remus’ utter amazement, Severus lifted their joined hands and pressed his lips to Remus’ knuckles. The shadow of the incomprehensible stranger was chased away, for now. Remus let his eyes close, overwhelmed by everything he was feeling. “I just wish there were another way...”

“I know,” Severus said, “but you can’t have it both ways. Either you carry on and hope for the same outcome in the end, or you change everything, and nothing is certain.”

“Yes,” Remus whispered. “I know that. You can’t have your life and live it too, to butcher an old adage.”

“Something like that.”

Remus sighed heavily. “Sometimes, I can’t help daydreaming. What if...”

“No ‘what-ifs,’” Severus interrupted. “That’s a dangerous question to ask.”

“But *what if* we could do something to help? I’m not suggesting we go out and try to kill Voldemort on our own. But what if we could chip away at his power, just a little? Lighten the burden for everyone else?”

Severus looked at him sharply. “Explain,” he demanded.

“I just keep thinking — Severus, that last year... Harry was working on something with Ron and Hermione. They were searching for something, something that would make it possible to defeat Voldemort. Do you know what it was?”

Severus looked chagrined; but there was something deeper, a flash of real pain that gave Remus the chills. “No,” he said. “All I know is that there was a plan that Dumbledore set in motion. I regret that I never discovered what it was.”

“Of course.” Remus brooded. “Well, it sure would be nice to know now.”

“Dumbledore had his reasons,” Severus said firmly. Intriguing, how Severus leapt to defend the man, even after all they had been through; but then, perhaps it was not so surprising.

“I know he did,” Remus said with a sigh. “It seems he planned for just about every contingency but this one.” Severus nodded in acknowledgement. There had been so many secrets. Secrets kept for their own good; or so they had to believe. It frustrated Remus, but he didn’t blame Dumbledore, just as he didn’t blame Severus. He wondered if Severus would tell him even if he did know.

Remus had been keeping secrets all his life, and so it hardly bothered him if others kept their own. And Severus had plenty of his own. Perhaps little by little, the secrets would corrode away until there was nothing left between them; and wasn’t that, in a way, a form of love? But it would be a

slow drip and not a deluge, like the gradual formation of a cavern. Drip, drip, drip. It was the only way for them. There was too much that Remus was not yet ready to tell.

Apart from all the rest there was his resolution, the promise he had made to his unborn child, the one he kept in his heart of hearts and would take to his grave, lest anyone try to deter him. It came upon him suddenly in moments like these.

The last thing Remus remembered from the battle was seeing his wife struck down. The image was razor-sharp; he still saw it when he closed his eyes at night. It would not happen again. He was going to save her. If they were really doomed to fight the same battle all over again in twenty years, he would make sure at least one outcome changed. With any luck, he'd find a way to do it that would ensure they both survived; but if saving Tonks meant taking a curse for her, he would do it without a second thought. Remus had already lived far longer than he'd ever counted on. The thought of a useful death twenty years in the future didn't frighten him at all. On the contrary, it was an immense comfort to him in his sleepless nights.

He had made a promise to Tonks when they'd decided to become a family. Outside the vows he had spoken at their wedding, there was an unspoken vow, a vow of protection that bound him just as firmly — though 'bound' was perhaps the wrong word. Remus was not burdened by his promise; it was easy to bear. If anything, it was an upside-down burden that lifted him, making him lighter the weightier it got. It no longer mattered whether or not they fell in love again, or married, or even had a child together; all that mattered was that this time he could save her, and he would.

Surely, if he could save one person, it would make this whole ordeal worthwhile. It would make *him* worthwhile.

"I wish I knew what you were thinking," Severus said, and Remus knew he meant it literally.

And then there was the other thing. The suspicion, suspended somewhere between fear and hope, that had been encroaching upon him nightly, creeping up imperceptibly at first, seeping through his pores and itching in his veins ever since he'd heard the whisper of the veil in Sirius' voice. It was a shape that lingered at the periphery of his vision; every time he tried to get a closer look, it blurred and disappeared. Remus dared not name it. Not yet.

"What makes you think that I'm thinking of anything?" Remus asked with a smile.

"Your breathing has become erratic," Severus responded, taking the question seriously, "and I just saw your nostrils flare."

"I see," Remus said nervously. "Nothing escapes your notice, does it?"

Severus shrugged and said, with something like modesty, "That's the idea." He darted a glance at Remus. "But it doesn't mean I always understand."

"Oh." Remus blinked. "You're asking me a question, aren't you?" he ventured.

Severus stared intently at his own outstretched legs. "Not necessarily," he said.

"I'll show you what I'm thinking right now," Remus said. Then, feeling somewhat guilty and positively Slytherin for his dissimulation, he leaned in and kissed Severus. Severus' response was lukewarm, so Remus flipped himself over to straddle Severus' lap, and *that* got a reaction out of him. This was a language Remus understood, a dance to a rhythm that dwelled deep within him, even if some of the footwork was new. This was *so* much easier than talking. With the right motions, he could make Severus forget all about the question. He could make himself forget why

he didn't want to answer.

The best-laid schemes...

May's full moon arrived on a mild night, full of promise. Moonrise was late that evening, which meant that Remus was able to eat dinner in the Great Hall with everyone else; moonset would come shortly after dawn. Had it not been such a mercifully short moon, Remus would not have been there when the news broke.

It had become an increasingly common occurrence, the flurry of confused activity that accompanied every delivery of a special edition *Evening Prophet*. But it had never been like this before. Remus, whose internal sense of chronology had gone all off-kilter, realised as soon as he glimpsed the headline which night this was. It was the largest-scale Death Eater attack to date; nearly forty homes targeted within the span of an hour, in broad daylight. Information had been trickling through on the wireless since mid-morning, but inside the walls of the castle there had been no breach until the evening papers arrived. The death toll was staggering. Remus numbly watched the scene unfold around him for the second time in his life. Students and professors scrabbling to get a look at the list of confirmed casualties; dawning recognition, cries, shrieks, fainting spells, chaos.

What Remus knew, and they did not, was that the night would only bring more terror.

Then the list was unfurled beside him, and he was able to read over Peter's shoulder. Remus hadn't known any of the victims, but he vaguely recognised several names. This time, though, one line stood out to him, jolting him out of his stupor. *Fereydoun and Forough Zarrabian, Muggles, of London; their daughter Mahtab Rosier (41)*... Remus jerked his head up, his eyes seeking out the Slytherin table through the tumult; past Severus, who was mute and motionless, and past Regulus, who looked physically ill (*had he really not known this was coming?*), until at last he spotted little Roshanak Rosier rushing toward the door. Without a second thought, Remus got up and sprinted after her.

"Rosier!" he called out. She ignored him, careening toward the dungeons as she heaved with sobs. "Roshanak, I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry..." Remus tried, feeling utterly useless.

Roshanak spun on her heel. Her face was twisted with grief and fury. "*Go away!*" she cried.

"Roshanak..."

“Leave me alone!” Roshanak hissed. “Are you stupid? It’s bad enough everyone knows I’m a half-blood. The last thing I need now is to be seen with some bloody *Gryffindor* hanging about me!” As she said the words, she reached out and shoved Remus back with the full strength of her body; and though it barely caused him to stumble, he might as well have been struck by a wrecking ball. Twelve years old, and this was what they had done to her. Would it even be safe for her to mourn her family?

“Roshanak, I only wanted to — ”

Then Slughorn was there, placing a protective hand on Roshanak’s shoulder and telling Remus gently that perhaps he’d better go, and before Remus had time to retreat Poppy was there, face lined with anger or concern, grasping Remus firmly and leading him away through the confused mass of students pouring forth from the Great Hall.

The night was hell. Emotional anguish gave way to physical pain. Remus didn’t feel the hours in between; all he felt was a continuous chain of agony from one transformation to the next, until at last he began to come to on the cold wooden floor. He felt, somehow, that someone should be there with him, reassuring him, speaking his name; but the only sound that echoed in the sparse room was his own whimpering. As soon as he could open his eyes, he scanned his surroundings. Prongs and Padfoot were there, curled around one another in sleep. Relief washed over him when he realised he was not alone; but it was short-lived. Remus’ body was covered all over with stinging pain. He must have really done a number on himself during the night. *No Wolfsbane*, he remembered distantly. He let out what was meant to be a word but came out as more of a whine, as if he hadn’t quite shaken off the wolf yet.

James and Sirius snapped to attention, and within a minute they were upon him, dressing him and moving him to the bed. Remus could tell by the looks on their faces that he was in a bad state. He tasted blood on his lips. He began to doze off again, eager to let go.

His friends stayed at the foot of the bed, standing sentinel over him. He could hear them whispering, no doubt discussing him, but he couldn’t find the energy to listen to their words. Fifteen minutes passed, half an hour; and then, all of a sudden, the whispers stopped. Remus heard the soft thud of something landing on the floor, and the unmistakable sound of Sirius and James leaping to their feet. Remus opened his eyes. A rush of adrenaline put any thought of sleep out of his mind. James and Sirius had their backs turned protectively toward Remus and their wands out, trained on Severus Snape.

Severus stared back at them, stock-still. He had obviously not expected them to be there. “Oh,” he uttered softly. “*Fuck.*”

If Remus hadn’t been so frightened, he might have laughed.

James looked incensed, but when Remus turned his attention to Sirius, expecting a similar expression of fury, he saw that his friend was bloodless and trembling. “How... you... you’re not supposed to know...” Sirius gasped faintly. He fell back against the bed, looking as if he’d seen a dementor.

“How did you get in here?” James barked, wand still levelled at Severus’ throat.

“Emergency portkey,” Severus said.

“There’s an emergency portkey?”

“Of course there’s an emergency portkey.”

“Yes,” Remus jumped in. “Yes, and Severus knows because... I... told him about it?” Damn it, he was far too groggy to think on his feet.

“That’s right,” Severus agreed.

“You told him?” James repeated incredulously. “*He knows?*”

“Obviously. I’m here, am I not?” Severus replied. He was clearly growing impatient with being threatened.

“James, will you lower your wand?” Remus pleaded.

“Remus, when did you — why would you — ?” James stammered.

“Never mind that,” Severus said briskly. “There isn’t time.”

“What’s going on, Severus?” Remus asked, dreading the answer.

Severus’ expression became grim. “Werewolf attacks. Last night, scattered across the country, but clearly targeted. They’re apparently connected to the Death Eater action yesterday morning.” He turned his attention from James to Remus. “News hasn’t broken yet. We still have time to come up with an alibi for you before the whole castle wakes up.”

“An alibi?” Remus echoed. What was Severus thinking? What in God’s name had possessed him...?

“If news hasn’t broken yet, how do *you* know about it?” James growled.

“A little snake told me,” Severus said dismissively. “Are you going to help, or are you going to get in the way?”

At this, Sirius, who had been uncharacteristically silent for some time, leapt into action. “Right. Well, we were in detention, obviously,” he said matter-of-factly.

“All night long?” Severus asked, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, not last night. We have detention tonight, because we were caught fighting in the corridor after curfew.”

“By who?” James asked.

“Remus, of course. He said he’d report me, and I was furious at him for ratting me out, so I turned on him.”

Severus raised his eyebrows. “Furious enough to do *that* to him?” he asked, gesturing toward Remus. Remus wondered, again, just how grisly he looked.

Sirius’ eyes flashed with pain, but the pain quickly vanished beneath his no-nonsense demeanour. “I have a terrible temper,” he said flatly. “Now, hex me.”

“What?” Severus looked astonished. It would have been hilarious at any other time.

“Go on, hex me. We both know you want to. Now’s your chance.”

Severus seemed truly dumbfounded by this request. He raised his wand toward Sirius but hesitated, perhaps suspecting some sort of trick. “Oh, for Godric’s sake,” James interjected. “I’ll do it, then.”

He turned on Sirius and punched him on the nose.

“OWW! *Jesus*,” Sirius cried, covering his bleeding nose ineffectually with his hand. “Nice one,” he added. Then he turned to Remus and silently cast something that caused his forehead to prickle for a moment. Remus ran a hand over his brow.

“It says ‘NARK,’” James said helpfully. “That’s a nice touch.”

“Thanks,” Sirius said.

“I hate to break in again,” Severus said, “but I was seen in my dorm last night. I couldn’t have been out assaulting you in the corridors.”

“That’s fine,” Sirius said. “Then it was just Remus and I. You caught me sneaking about after curfew, or something. Then, of course, you had to spend the rest of the night in the hospital wing.”

“And you didn’t?” Remus asked.

“I refused to go,” Sirius said with a shrug. At least that part was believable.

“Speaking of which, erm, hold still, I should probably — ” James cast a rudimentary healing spell to stop the bleeding, and another to clean Sirius’ face.

“Well, no one’s going to mistake that for Madame Pomfrey’s handiwork,” Sirius said, pulling his hand away. His nose didn’t appear to be broken, so there was some good news at least.

“The hospital wing!” James exclaimed. “Peter! I’ll bet he’s still there. He can corroborate. Oh, Remus, you didn’t see. After you left last night, Peter started puking up a storm. That’s why he’s not — ” His mouth snapped shut abruptly.

“Why he’s not here right now,” Severus supplied. “Please, don’t hold back on my account.”

“So, who are we serving detention with?” Remus asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Not you. Just me,” Sirius corrected. “No need to tarnish your reputation, too.”

“Professor McGonagall?” James suggested.

Severus shook his head. “Too upstanding. Ask Slughorn. He’ll lie for you.”

“Good thinking,” James admitted.

“If you can, take Lily with you to ask him,” Severus said. Turning to Remus, he asked, “Slughorn does know you’re a werewolf, doesn’t he?”

“Erm, I suspect he might,” Remus said. “But maybe keep it vague, just in case.” He flushed.

“James, make sure he takes points from Gryffindor, won’t you? I’ve been, err, temporarily relieved from assigning points.”

“I’m on it,” James said, moving toward the door. “Anything else I should know before I go?”

“Yes. Tell Lily everything. She’s going to find out either way, so we might as well have her assistance,” Severus said. He glowered. “You know, as a rule, the less elaborate your lie is, the easier it is to maintain.”

“I’m not worried about us,” James said with a smirk. “We’re a well-oiled machine. Oh! Take this.”

He pulled out his invisibility cloak, wadded it, and tossed it to Sirius.

“Right,” Sirius began as James left the Shack. “Let’s recap. Remus, you caught me sneaking out after curfew and decided to be a responsible Head Boy, for once in your life. We got into a fight, and you came out of it much worse for wear, though you did land one good blow — pure self-defence, of course. You spent the night in the infirmary, along with Wor — Peter, and I’ll be serving detention with Slughorn tonight for beating up his favourite student. That’s two professors who can vouch for our whereabouts last night — assuming Pomfrey goes along with it — and anyone who looks at either of our faces will have all the proof they need. I think that should just about cover it for now. God, with all the gossip we’re about to give them, no one will even have time to think about werewolves!”

“Did we have to come up with something so convoluted?” Remus asked. “Couldn’t we just have been asleep in our dorm?”

Sirius and Severus wore eerily similar expressions of exasperation. “You get like that from falling out of bed, then?” Sirius asked.

“God, is it really that bad?” Remus groaned.

“It’s bad,” Severus said, “and you really should be in the infirmary right now.”

“Don’t ring the bell. You need to get to Madame Pomfrey as quickly as possible, and *I* need to slip back into the dorms before anyone sees me. Take the cloak,” Sirius instructed. “Snape, do you think you can get him to the hospital wing?”

Severus looked briefly taken aback before sneering. “I think I can manage,” he said.

“Good. *Go.*”

Remus realised that Sirius didn’t want Severus to catch him turning into Padfoot. Severus must have inferred this too, because he wasted no time helping Remus to his feet and making for the tunnel. When they reached the end of it, Severus threw the invisibility cloak around both of them. It hurt to walk, but Remus focused on the electrifying feeling of Severus’ arm wrapped around him, supporting him.

“This is bizarre,” Remus whispered as they made their way across the dew-drenched lawn.

“This was not what I envisioned,” Severus muttered. “I would have come up with a much more elegant solution myself. Black has no impulse control.”

“Why didn’t you, then?” Remus asked. “Why didn’t you have a plan already in place? You didn’t actually hear about the werewolf attacks last night, did you? You remembered them happening.”

“Yes,” Severus said, tensing. “And I did have... something of a plan, before Potter and Black scuppered it.”

“You weren’t expecting them,” Remus said. “*You* were impulsive too, you know. Emergency portkey... how did you even know about that?”

“I came across it during my tenure as Headmaster. When I found it, it was still under a glass case like a muggle fire extinguisher.”

“Severus, are you telling me you broke into the Headmaster’s office last night to find the portkey?”

“Of course not! I made my own, weeks ago.”

“How... *why* did you go to all that trouble? Don’t get me wrong, I’m very grateful, but I remember this night too, and nothing happened to me after except that I fell into a terrible depression. I didn’t need an alibi.”

“Yes,” Severus said, “but the first time, you didn’t have to contend with multiple students who know your secret and happen to have vendettas against you.”

Right. Remus hadn’t thought of that. “Except for you,” he couldn’t help pointing out.

“Except for me,” Severus agreed. “But I wasn’t stupid enough to waste such valuable information on a false accusation.”

“I suppose not. God, how did I ever manage without you?”

“Poorly.” Severus snorted.

“It’s all right you forgot, you know,” Remus said.

“Forgot what?” Severus asked, bristling.

“I mean that you didn’t put two and two together until last night, or early morning — it’s all right. I never even thought of it myself, so I can hardly blame you for having to improvise a plan.”

Miserable as he was, something warm and sweetly aching was settling over Remus. Severus had been frightened for him; frightened enough to act rashly. Severus cared enough to be frightened for him.

“You didn’t take your last dose of Wolfsbane,” Severus whispered accusingly.

“It couldn’t be helped. In all the confusion, Poppy found me and dragged me away.”

“Yes, well, I’ll have to have a word with her,” Severus grumbled, “in twenty years or so.”

They were nearly at the infirmary. They stopped in a shadowed corner, lest anyone catch Severus depositing Remus by the door.

“Thank you, Severus, I — ”

Severus stiffened. “I’ve just had an idea,” he said.

“What?” Remus asked.

Severus shook his head. “No, it’s a foolish one. Lord help me, I’ve been spending far too much time around Gryffindors. What kind of self-respecting Slytherin just shouts ‘I have an idea!’ before they’ve even thought it through?”

Remus stifled a giggle. “Now I *really* want to know,” he said.

“Get inside,” Severus whispered. “And best if you don’t mention I was here. The fewer people who know of my involvement, the better.”

“Right,” Remus said. “Thank you, Severus.” He planted a quick kiss on Severus’ cheek, cringed upon realising that his mouth was still smudged with dried blood, and ducked out from under the invisibility cloak before Severus could respond.

Remus hoped to creep quietly into the infirmary, but he was foiled by the loud groan of the door hinges. Poppy was upon him in an instant. "My goodness!" she gasped. She pulled him into a cubicle enchanted with a sound-dampening charm. "What happened to your forehead?" she demanded.

"Fight with Sirius," Remus said. The lie was transparent. Poppy was, at least theoretically, the last person to have seen him before his transformation the night before. That was all right, though. All that mattered was whether she would go along with it.

"Why didn't you ring the bell?" Poppy scolded. It was not exactly what Remus expected her to say.

"I'm sorry. I'll remember next time," Remus said, acting contrite.

Poppy gave him an odd look. "Next time, Lupin, you'll be out of school."

Remus' chest felt tight. He hadn't thought of that. Although he knew that he would see Poppy again one day, he was suddenly overcome. "Right. Of course. Thank you," Remus said in a choked whisper. "I mean, for everything."

"There, there," Poppy murmured soothingly. She placed a comforting hand on his arm before she set about cleaning his wounds. "You're going to do just fine out there. I'm certain of it. You have a bright future ahead of you, Remus."

Remus sniffled, then straightened his spine. "Madame Pomfrey, if anyone asks, you'll tell them I was here all night, won't you?"

"Of course I will, dear," Poppy said.

"And will you tell them about the fight with Sirius? Last night?"

Poppy frowned. "I take my oath of patient confidentiality seriously, Mr. Lupin. I would never gossip about the cause of a student's injuries."

"I know," Remus said quickly, "but if it comes up?"

Poppy looked at him intently. Remus' lashes fluttered several times before he looked away. He had the strangest feeling she was peering into his mind. "Very well," she said, not looking happy about it at all. "Now, let's get you to bed so that you can rest and recover. As it happens, Pettigrew is here as well."

"Thank you, Madame Pomfrey."

Peter was in the bed closest to the corner of the room. His face was clammy and mottled with ruddy purple. He really had been sicking up all night. Peter watched with doleful eyes as Remus lowered himself into the next bed over. Scrabbling for his wand on the bedside table, Peter cast *Muffliato*. "Hello. Erm, what happened to...?" Peter tapped his own forehead.

"Bit of a long story, but if anyone asks, Sirius and I aren't on speaking terms at the moment."

"Okay," said Peter, well accustomed to going along with his friends' schemes. He seemed preoccupied, anyway. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you last night."

"That's all right, Peter. You obviously had a rough night yourself."

Peter nodded, and a few tears leaked from his eyes, as if they had been jostled by the movement. "I

couldn't... after I saw the news, I just..."

"I know," Remus said. He felt as if his innards had turned to lead. He wanted to be anywhere but in that room, having this conversation with Peter. He'd said *I know*, but he didn't know, really. He had no idea what was going through Peter's head. Remus didn't *want* to be burdened with that knowledge, but he could see it approaching, slow but sure, ominous, as if all along he had been lying in the path of a Foucault pendulum that had finally, in its gradual rotation, aligned on a collision course with him.

"I need to tell you something," Peter whispered.

No.

"Please, Moony, it's important. Please promise me you won't tell anyone else."

No, no, no. "I can't make that promise without knowing what it is. I'm sorry, Peter."

Peter nodded, as if he'd anticipated this. "Over Easter hols — when I was at home — I went to see that man. The one I told you about. I just left home for three days. I didn't tell anyone where I went. I was with him the whole time."

Remus felt a wave of nausea and wondered if it would be impolite to appropriate Peter's bucket.

"I'm frightened, Remus."

"Why?" Remus asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"That man... he had a sort of... well, I thought it was a tattoo, on his arm." Peter began to cry. "It was the same... it was the same as the mark that was in the paper last night. The mark they put up over all those houses where... oh, *God*..." he choked.

No, no, no, no, no. NO. Remus was struck, not with dread or sorrow, but with fury. Burning, blinding fury. *No, you don't get to have this. THIS is not your excuse.* All those years, the wondering, the eternal *why* that haunted him in the night... for this? There were plenty of other gay wizards who'd *somehow* managed to get by without betraying their loved ones to Voldemort, and yet he was meant to accept that *this* was why... *This can't be your reason. This doesn't cut it. You can't have this. YOU DON'T GET TO HAVE THIS...*

"Remus... Moony..." Peter's voice was weak; Remus could barely hear it above the pounding in his own head. "Remus, I *told him things*. I told him so many things. God, I must be the stupidest person alive. I wish I were — "

"Don't," Remus said reflexively. His body was calming, little by little, but his mind was on fire. "What did you tell him, Wormtail?"

"About my family," Peter sobbed. "He knows I'm a half-blood. He knows... he knows that my sisters are muggles... he..." Peter froze up, as if the horror had hit him anew. Remus froze, too; all his fiery anger turned to ice.

Of course. Peter's family. His mother, his stepfather, little June and Audrey. Remus hadn't even thought of them. *Stupid, stupid, selfish*, he berated himself. When had he ever spared a thought for Peter's family? He had written Peter's mother a letter of condolence, and visited her on the first anniversary of Peter's presumed death. By then, her husband had already taken the children to some unknown safe haven, away from Britain and its wizards and their murderous wars. Remus wondered what had happened to Peter's sisters. He had never once thought to look them up, even

when the war was long over. Even before he knew the truth of Peter's betrayal, when Remus had still been loyal to the memory of his friend, his loyalty hadn't extended as far as checking in on his family, making sure that they were safe.

Were they safe? Did they live? He had no idea. It was likely that Peter never found out, either. Had he still thought of them when he was cowering at his Dark Lord's feet? Had he whispered, in the depths of his bleak and broken soul, *at least I kept them safe?*

Remus was lost. Guilt lay upon him like a wreath of clouds. There was nothing he could say; nothing he *should* say. He wasn't meant to know any of this, let alone act upon his knowledge. He was supposed to let things run their course. That was the agreement. And yet his friend was sitting in front of him, close enough to touch, silently pleading with Remus to help him change course. He was still the friend of Remus' childhood. His soul wasn't broken yet. He was *terrified*.

Was it really right for Remus to remain silent? He had felt so sure of his duty, so righteous, when it was all abstract and far-off, but now that time was closing in on him... Could there be another way? Could they change the future together, create a happier world, he and his extraordinary friends?

"Peter, I — "

Remus never got to finish his thought. They both stilled at the sound of the door creaking open. Really, this was meant to be a restful place, someone ought to lubricate the hinges; but this time, it worked out in their favour. Remus ended the *Muffliato* so as not to seem suspect. The door opened a man's-width and closed again. A moment later, the invisibility cloak was whipped off and stashed away; but it wasn't Severus, as Remus had expected. At first, Remus couldn't make out anything but red marring a pallid face. His stomach lurched again. Through the blood rushing in his ears, Remus heard Poppy exclaim, "Mr. Black!" before she drew the boy behind a curtain for privacy. It was only a sham privacy, though. Remus watched their shadow-puppet silhouettes through the screen, bent close together in whispered conversation while Poppy cleaned and sterilised a truly sickening number of wounds. At last they emerged again, Poppy walking her patient to the bed beside Remus and settling him in. She looked piercingly from Remus, to Peter, to Regulus Black. "I thought you had more sense than that. Brawling in the hallways after curfew — you, Mr. Black, a prefect, and you, Mr. Lupin, Head Boy!" After checking up on the three of them, she retreated to her office again.

Remus stared at Regulus with unabashed horror. Regulus smiled wryly back at him — at least, as much as he could smile. His charming little dimples had been cleft by the gashes that now scored his face. The wounds had missed his eyes by a hair's breadth. Now that the blood was cleaned away, they didn't look quite as gruesome as Remus had anticipated, but they would still leave Regulus scarred. Remus could tell.

"Sirius," Regulus said. "You remember. Last night, before you intervened in our fight and he turned on you." As he spoke, he neatly folded the invisibility cloak, which he then tossed onto Remus' bed.

Remus gaped at him. He was shocked clean to his core. The past twelve hours had dealt him blow after blow, and somehow, this crowned them all. But he didn't say any of that. What he said was, "Looks like he got you worse than me."

"Yes, well, he likes you better than me," Regulus retorted.

"I suppose that makes sense," Remus said weakly.

“I was helping with late-night patrol,” Regulus continued. “That’s why I was out. My dorm mates would have been asleep when I returned, and I rose so early this morning, they’d never even know I was there. *If* I had spent the night in my dorm, and not here in the infirmary with you.”

“Regulus, I — I don’t know what to say. I...” Remus screwed his eyes shut and tried to calm his heaving breaths. “I know you did this to cover for yourself, and not for me, but there’s a good chance that you just saved me from something... really awful.”

Regulus’ voice became steel. “I don’t need any cover, and I didn’t do this for myself,” he said.

Remus wondered what Severus could have possibly said to make Regulus trust him implicitly, to offer himself up so quickly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. What he did know was that it was a stroke of — well, maybe not brilliance, but pretty good improvisation under the circumstances. An alibi corroborated only by Remus’ best friends would be flimsy at best. Regulus provided an additional witness *and* a plausible motive for Remus and Sirius to fight. Regulus could crush any rumours that might arise about Remus — he had done it before — and no one would suspect him of lying to help his least favourite Gryffindors. Even better: now Regulus knew he wasn’t the only Slytherin — no, the only *Death Eater* — in possession of Remus’ secret. That instantly deflated the value of his information. For now, Regulus had wisely chosen to get in on the scheme, rather than looming threateningly outside.

As to what Regulus would get out of all this... well, that was somewhat mystifying.

Remus recalled the words Severus had spoken months before: *a Black first, Slytherin second, Death Eater third... Can’t you see it’s not just yourself you’re putting in danger anymore?* Sirius had asked. Perhaps, through a twisted sort of logic, one might come to the conclusion that the way to keep Sirius safe was to prove how absolute the rift between he and Regulus had become. And Sirius, when he saw Regulus’ mutilated face, would he understand what his brother had done?

“Sirius won’t come out of this looking very good,” Remus murmured. *Even if it had been mainly his idea.*

Regulus shrugged, then winced. “Perhaps not, but it’s his reputation to squander. Always has been.” He looked fond, just for a moment. “And if nothing else, people might think twice about going up against him after this.”

Remus didn’t have anything to say to that. He turned his head to the left, then back to the right, observing the two Death Eaters that lay to either side of him, two soon-to-be turncoats of different ilk; two Death Eaters with whom he had entrusted his secret and, in effect, his life. And it was all thanks to the timely intervention of his triple-turncoat Death Eater boyfriend.

Remus let his head fall heavily on the pillow. All he’d ever wanted was a quiet life. He’d never courted Darkness; and yet Darkness adored him, pursued him all throughout his life like a besotted lover. And, for the first time, Remus was beginning to think that perhaps it was more than simple rotten luck.

What Happened

“Where the hell are we, Lupin?” Severus stumbled, almost knocking into him. Funny, Remus had assumed on some subconscious level that Severus could see in the dark. He had read somewhere — perhaps in a Muggle Studies class — about ponies that spent their entire lives labouring in mine shafts; if they were brought to the surface, their eyes were bandaged so they wouldn’t be blinded by the daylight.

“We’re in the basement of Honeydukes,” Remus said, as if this were perfectly self-explanatory.

“Pardon me?” Severus asked in disbelief. “First you drag me through a dirt tunnel, and now we’re breaking and entering? I did not agree to this when you said you wanted to go for an evening stroll. What, was your chocolate supply running low?”

“I would never steal from a local small business with such lovely proprietors!” Remus exclaimed, scandalised.

“That’s a lot of caveats. You might have stopped at ‘I would never steal.’ So, why *are* we here?”

“This,” Remus said. He threw his arms around Severus and apparated.

Remus tightened his grip as Severus scrabbled for purchase. “You know it’s extremely impolite to apparate someone without their permission, don’t you?” Severus scowled. Remus lowered himself carefully to a seated position, ushering Severus to do the same. “All right, where are we now?”

“The roof of the Post Office. Best view in town. Don’t worry, I checked for owl crap before we sat down.”

Severus frowned. “I’ve seen Hogsmeade before, Remus.”

“Yes, but I wanted to speak somewhere completely private. And it’s such a lovely clear night.” Remus tilted his face back to look at the sky. The moon was fast approaching its third quarter, which meant that nearly a week had passed since the chaotic night of the werewolf attacks.

“What is this about?” Severus asked in a low voice. His tone shifted subtly; this was his Business, Not Pleasure voice.

“I’ll get right to it. There’s something bothering me. I haven’t stopped thinking about it all week — I need to know something, Severus. That morning in the Shack, Sirius — well, if we were muggles, I’d say he looked like he’d seen a ghost — and he said something that sounded odd to me. He said, ‘You’re not supposed to know...’”

“Well, I wasn’t, was I?” Severus asked, unruffled.

“Yes, but it was the *way* he said it. He wasn’t angry like James was. He seemed... terrified. Why?” Remus thought he saw something twitch in Severus’ face. That was enough of a sign; he pounced. “You know something, don’t you? What is it? What are you keeping from me?”

“Nothing of any importance,” Severus murmured.

“Severus! You’re usually a better liar than that. Tell me what it is!” Remus demanded.

“It won’t make any difference,” Severus said.

“Why not?” Remus pressed. “Is it *immaterial*?”

“No,” Severus said. “It’s exceedingly material; but it’s also far too late to fix it now.”

“*Severus.*”

Severus turned to look at Remus, pain and annoyance fighting it out across his face. He heaved a world-weary sigh. “If you must know...” he said. “It was two years ago, the day after I — *we* arrived here.”

Remus felt very cold; colder than the damp night air around him. “What happened?” he asked.

Severus shook his head. “You really don’t know? But you must have sent him — there’s no other way it could have happened.”

“*What happened?*”

Severus shrugged like a teenager. “Black tracked me down in the hallway the next morning and tried to Oblivate me. It might even have worked, if the memory had been recent like he thought, and not twenty-two years in the past. I admit I was a bit dazed, but it wasn’t difficult to work out what he’d tried to do...”

No. That couldn’t be right. Sirius would have no reason, because Sirius had never told Severus about the Shrieking Shack in the first place. Remus had made sure of it. He’d been so careful, keeping watch over Sirius all day — it had been his one unwavering thought. There’d been no *time* for Sirius to slip away and find Severus; Remus hadn’t let him...

He must have drifted off to sleep. His friends were all gathered in the corner, sitting on Peter’s bed, whispering and looking his way with concern. Good. Let them be concerned for him. If they were concerned, maybe they wouldn’t do anything foolish. He closed his eyes again. As long as they were all accounted for, he felt safe.

Oh, God. After everything Remus had said that day, had Sirius *still* gone and betrayed him...?

“What memory, Severus?” Remus whispered. “What was he trying to make you forget?”

Severus looked baffled. “You *know* what,” he said.

Remus shook his head vigorously. “But that’s not possible. He never — I stopped him. He never told you about the Shrieking Shack and the Whomping Willow, not in this timeline. I made sure. I stopped him!”

Severus took his time responding, levelling a long, even look at Remus. “You couldn’t have stopped him,” he said. “It happened the day before we arrived.”

“No,” Remus said. “You must be mistaken. It had to have been the day of the full moon, or else...”

“I’m not mistaken,” Severus said harshly. “You think I’d misremember something like that?”

“No, but — ”

“It was the fourteenth. Black had the *charming* idea of disguising the note as a Valentine, just to make sure people jeered when it landed in front of me.”

Remus broke into a cold sweat. At least it hadn’t happened *after* his conversation with Sirius; but that revelation provided very little comfort. For two years, it had been one of his only certainties:

he, Remus Lupin, had stopped Sirius from luring Severus to the Shack that night. In doing so, he had set off a chain of events that had altered the past in large and small ways. Everything traced back to that moment; his actions. His decision. It was the whole reason he was here, two years later, sitting under the stars with Severus Snape.

Only, it wasn't. Remus hadn't changed a damn thing, after all.

Severus looked lost too, for his own reasons. "It really wasn't you?" he asked. "You didn't send Black to... make amends, the next day?" His lip curled of its own accord as he spoke.

"Of course not," Remus said. "I had no idea. You think I'd have left something that important up to him?"

"Well, fuck me," Severus said. (Severus must have been truly flabbergasted — he was slipping into the speech habits of his youth.) "Then Black must have gotten cold feet once he realised what might have — what *almost* happened. Apparently he didn't wish to make a second attempt at his little *prank* the next month."

"I don't understand," Remus said desperately. "If I didn't stop him from sending you, then why didn't you show up at the Shack that night?"

Severus stared very, very intently at the smoke curling from the chimney of a neighbouring building. Remus waited. He wanted to be patient, but he was so, so tired of being patient.

"I was a coward," Severus said, after what felt like an eternity to Remus.

Was that all? Remus felt something like relief. "No," he said. "It's perfectly reasonable that you didn't want to go through that again."

Severus shook his head. "I shouldn't have stopped it. It was — I was weak." His entire upper body was twisted away from Remus now.

"Severus, if you had gone that night — "

"Then none of this would be happening. Everything — all of the changes are my fault. It all started that night. I did this." He was shrinking, collapsing in on himself. "So. Now you know the truth."

Remus didn't know what to say, but he was pretty sure his first instinct — giddy, hysterical laughter — was not the correct response. He reached for Severus' back, but couldn't bring himself to touch. He didn't know if it would be welcome or not. Finally, afraid that Severus would turn around and catch him in the act of hovering, he withdrew his hand, withdrew his body, lay on his back and closed his eyes. It was easier this way, for him and for Severus. "I'm glad," Remus whispered.

"What for?" Severus sounded accusing.

"Everything. I'm glad you changed everything. Call me selfish, or stupid, or shortsighted, or whatever you like, but I'm glad. I'm grateful you didn't show up that night, Severus. I don't know if *I* could have lived through it a second time." He threw an arm over his closed eyes, trying to make the black even blacker. "I don't know if it was cowardice or not, but I think you saved *my* life that night."

It was quiet; so quiet, Remus could hear Severus breathing beside him. How could Remus have been so wrong, so misguided, so in his own head that he had never even considered any other possibility? He had assumed that he was the agent, the key to everything. Remus Lupin, centre of

the universe. And as for Sirius — it was a good thing they were still pretending to feud, because Remus wasn't sure he'd be able to look him in the eye any time soon. Yet at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to muster fresh anger over what was, in effect, the same very old wound he had nursed for years. Not now. Not when they had so little time left.

Time — this could have been the time. This could have been the moment. Remus could have brought up his suspicion, the creeping fear that had grown within him night by night, the Unnameable Thing that still gnawed at the edges of his consciousness. He could have told Severus right then...

He wasn't sure when Severus had lain down beside him, but he was startled when Severus seized both of his hands, tugging him so that they both lay on their sides facing one another.

"I've made up my mind," Severus said. His dark eyes were too intense, the whites too bright; it was like staring into the sun. "I'll lock you up."

"What?" Remus whispered. Severus gripped his hands so hard his knuckles looked like they might erupt from under his skin.

"The night of... that night, in 1981... I'll lock you up. I'll bind you if I have to. I'll spell all the exits. I'd even give you the Draught of Living Death, if you asked. I'll make it so you can't escape, so you can't help them, no matter how much you want to. That way, it won't be your fault. Your soul will be safe. Remus, your soul will stay pure..."

"Severus," Remus said hoarsely, tears pooling in his eyes, "that's the most romantic kidnapping threat I've ever heard."

"Stop it," Severus said. "I'm deadly serious."

"I know." Remus squeezed Severus' hand in return. "I know, and to know that you would even consider doing that for me is... but I won't let you, Severus. We're in this together. We always have been. If we can't find another way out of this..." Remus swallowed. He could feel snot trickling from his nose and knew he must look a mess. "If you're damned, then I'm damned, too, and that's just the way it is."

Severus stared at Remus as if in disbelief. Then, to Remus' surprise, a small, coy smile bloomed on his face. "*Remus Lupin*. We've only just started getting to know one another better. Don't you think it's a bit soon to talk about committing our souls to the Inferno together?"

Remus laughed; it was all the better for being so unexpected. He wiped his sleeve across his face. "I don't know if you recall, but I once married and procreated with a woman I'd been seeing for two months. Honestly, I can't believe it's taken us *this* long to get around to the subject of eternity. For me, this is taking it glacially slow."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Presumptuous, for the man who has yet to ask me for a first date."

Remus' heart skipped a beat. Just as quickly, he tried to tamp his excitement back down. They couldn't keep doing this. Every time they came too close to discussing things seriously, they fell back into one of their old grooves. Once, they had traded insults; now it was flirtatious banter. The result was, oddly enough, more or less the same. It dredged their conversation back the surface, out of dangerous territory. Remus knew that it was past time to break the habit.

Oh, but Severus had dangled such an enticing piece of bait, and Remus wanted so very badly to bite. "You're right," he said, in what would have to pass for a seductive tone. "Severus, can I take

you out sometime?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Severus said haughtily.

“Oh, fuck off. Just go out with me,” Remus said, prodding his shoulder.

“Charming. Is that how you landed your lovely wife?”

“Yes, actually, except she was the one that said it to me.”

Severus snorted. “What did you have in mind, then?”

“I was thinking perhaps a romantic night of stargazing up on a rooftop...”

“Figures you’d pick something you don’t have to pay for. That’s a bit gauche, you know.”

“Mm. What if I bring you flowers next time?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

Before he could second-guess himself, Remus rolled over so that he was half on top of Severus, arms resting sphinx-like across his torso. He gazed down into Severus’ alert eyes. “I love you. Just so you know. I hope that’s all right.”

Severus scanned Remus’ face as if he were looking for some secondary meaning there, some footnote, parenthetical or marginalia that would help to clear things up. Apparently finding nothing, he inhaled sharply and breathed out slowly. “That’s all right,” he said.

Buttercup

“Here. I told you I’d bring you flowers this time.” Remus dropped a small posy of buttercups onto Severus’ lap.

“Next date, you said. Usually, when one is planning a date, one warns the other person in advance.”

Remus snorted. “I’m not sure ‘warn’ is the appropriate verb here.”

“Agree to disagree.” Severus shifted. “I’m busy right now. Plan better next time.”

“No you’re not. I know you don’t actually need to revise for” — Remus crouched to see the cover of the book Severus was holding — “Defence Against the Dark Arts? Really, Severus?”

“I’m doing a bit of independent research. How to muzzle your werewolf.”

Remus plopped down beside him. “Besides, if you wanted to be left alone, you wouldn’t be sitting at our tree.”

“*Our* tree?” Severus asked with a raised eyebrow; but his attempt at derision was rather undermined by the flush that graced his face. Remus felt a rush of warmth in his stomach. Severus was looking well. All the sunlight they’d been soaking in lately seemed to do him good.

“Mmhm,” Remus confirmed. He glanced at the book, now sitting forgotten on Severus’ lap. “I don’t know how you do it,” he said. “I can’t even keep up the pretence of revising for N.E.W.T.s. I’m so desperately bored, with everyone else so focused on exams.”

Severus tensed. “If you’re bored, there’s still plenty of research that you could be working on.”

“I didn’t mean — ” Remus felt abashed. “Yes, of course, we have our work cut out for us. It’s just getting harder and harder to balance planning for the future and enjoying what little time we have left here. I... I don’t want to go. I don’t want to face what comes next.”

“Well,” Severus said stiffly, “I’m sure I have *no idea* what that’s like.”

Remus’ shoulders sagged. He’d stepped in it once again. Of course, his own life post-graduation was nothing compared to the imminent horrors Severus was facing. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I’ve no right to complain. Not when you... God, Severus, it kills me to think about what you’re up against. I’m worried sick for you. I hope you know that.”

Severus sighed and ran a hand through his hair, the only outward sign that he was actually quite shaken. “I know,” he said. “Your apology is unnecessary.” He looked sidelong at Remus, almost furtively. “Did your relationship with your friends begin to deteriorate right after leaving, or did

that happen later?”

Remus almost laughed, though there was nothing funny in it. “That’s an awfully blunt way to put it,” he said. “At the time, it all seemed so sudden. Like one day I looked around at my best friends and realised that we were broken; that none of us really trusted one another anymore. In hindsight, I suppose the cracks began to form much earlier. I just didn’t want to see.”

Severus nodded. “Back then, I wouldn’t have understood you. I couldn’t leave school fast enough. I didn’t have any friends to leave behind.” Remus marvelled at the apparent ease with which Severus spoke these words. He truly had changed. Expanded. Remus loved him so much he thought he might weep from the pain of it.

“And now?” Remus asked softly.

Severus looked reproachful. “You already know the answer to that,” he said.

Remus lay his head on Severus’ shoulder, inhaling the scent of his skin at the crook of his neck. “I wish,” he said, “we could say to Hell with it all and spend the next week doing whatever we please.”

“You still need to sit for your Defence N.E.W.T. if you ever want to get hired as a professor,” Severus pointed out. Ever the pragmatist.

“I know, I know,” Remus grumbled into the collar of Severus’ robes. “I’m only daydreaming.”

But Severus wasn’t feeling soft or dreamy. Remus felt the way his muscles jumped under his skin, full of latent energy. “From here on, we’ll need to keep our wits about us. It will be far more difficult for us to communicate once we leave this place.”

Remus understood the implications of this. It was true; they had no idea how often they’d be able to sneak off and see each other after they left school. For that reason, it was more essential than ever that they devise a plan and stick to it, so as not to unintentionally undermine one another.

He understood, too, the other implication of Severus’ words: *I don’t want to leave you, either.*

Remus felt suddenly that it was now or never. He had to tell Severus about his secret suspicion, and if Severus thought him a bit mad — well, so be it. It *was* a bit mad, yet Remus was now nearly certain that he was right; he grew more and more certain every day. “Severus,” he said softly, lifting his head, “I don’t think we’re going to be leaving this place.”

Severus looked blankly at him. “I beg your pardon?”

Remus cast about for the right words to voice the idea he had struggled with for months of sleepless nights. For all the time he had spent on it, it was remarkably difficult to articulate. “I mean, I think our time here is nearly up.”

“Time... up?” Severus echoed. “You think we’re on a fixed schedule?”

“Something along those lines. I can’t be certain, of course, but I’ve been thinking about our circumstances...”

“So our time runs out and... what? We disappear? Go back to where we came from?”

“I have no idea. I hope that might be the case.”

Severus' eyes narrowed. "We can't just... go back. It wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"Because if we went back to our own time tomorrow, what would happen to us — the version of us left behind? Would we — I mean, they — suddenly wake up tomorrow as eighteen-year-olds with no memory of the past two years? Or would they remember everything? No, they couldn't; because if they remembered everything they would be *us*, and not *them*, and we would still be *here*. And say we wake up in 1998, and everything in the past has changed because of our actions — what do *we* remember of the intervening years? Do we have any knowledge of what happened between 1978 and 1998 in this new timeline, or are we stuck with an old set of memories that no longer match reality? Or, wait, perhaps we'll just pop out of existence for twenty years, only to reappear and frighten the living daylights out of everyone in 1998. Don't you see, Lupin? It's *impossible*. It's too much of a paradox. If we had been here for a day, perhaps it could work; even two or three days could be accounted for. But not twenty-eight months! Too much has changed. We can't *go back* without creating a gaping rift somewhere in time." Severus looked wild now. Remus had never heard him speak so rapidly; he was tripping over his own tongue trying to spit out the words. Remus' head was spinning.

"That would be a paradox. Yes. But what if we went back to 1998, and nothing in the past had changed, and we were back in our original timeline?"

"Then none of this would have happened."

"Well, it *did* happen, for us. But maybe not for anyone else."

"If that's the case," Severus said, looking anguished, "then all of this has been for nothing."

"Perhaps," Remus said, because he didn't want to lie to Severus. "I suppose that depends on whether you would call *this*" — he gestured between the two of them — "'nothing.'"

"Don't twist my words," Severus snarled.

"I don't mean to," Remus said calmly. "I'm only telling you what I believe to be true."

"Why? What *possible* reason could you have, apart from wishful thinking?"

"Severus. I need you to answer me something. When did you get the Dark Mark?"

"No, you can't say something like that and then just change the subject!"

"I'm not changing the subject. Please, just tell me."

Severus frowned. "It happened over the winter holiday, seventh year."

"No, I mean *this* time. When did you go? I was with you for at least part of that time, and when I wasn't, I was watching you on the Map — oh, don't give me that look, you'd've done the same — so when did you find the time to slip away and do *that*?"

Severus' frown deepened. "I... did it over the summer."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"When, exactly?"

“I...”

“Tell me, what was last summer like? What else did you do?”

“I went back to Cokeworth,” Severus said gruffly, “like I always did.”

“What *specifically* did you do?”

“Nothing! I never did anything during the summers. I locked myself in my bedroom and slept all day. Is *that* what you wanted to hear?”

“Nothing, except for a face-to-face interview with Voldemort?”

“Right.” Severus was plainly distressed. Remus felt a stab of guilt, but he had to press on.

“But you don’t remember the details, do you? That seems like an awfully important thing to slip your mind...”

“You forgot who you *were* for a few months,” Severus snapped defensively, “so I hardly think you’re one to cast judgment.”

“I did forget,” Remus conceded, “and I’m not being judgmental. But this — it’s not the same.”

“What’s not the same? For once, will you put your tragically wasted vocabulary skills to use? What do you mean by ‘*this*,’ Lupin?”

“Do you ever get letters from home?”

“No,” Severus said darkly. “What of it?”

“Well, I do. And I write home pretty regularly. But here’s the thing. The letters I send, and the letters I receive... I started noticing that they don’t quite add up. I mean, my parents’ letters never really seem to answer the letters I write them. I asked them to come visit me, and they never said a word in response. That isn’t like them at all. If I stop to think about it...” Remus swallowed hard. It was difficult to say it out loud. “It’s like they’re the same letters I received the first time around. Like out there, in the world beyond our little bubble, nothing has changed.”

Severus didn’t say anything. He was burning a hole through Remus with his eyes.

“I’ve been trying to remember last summer, too. I have this sort of vague impression of it, but when I try to actually recall what happened, I can’t... it’s more like a story someone told me, and my mind filled in the rest. I only remember waking up on the train, horribly confused, and for some godforsaken reason I’d been made Head Boy. I couldn’t remember agreeing to it. That was the first time I wondered...”

“That long ago?” Severus whispered.

“But I brushed it off. My mind has been known to play tricks on me, as you’ve pointed out. But now I can’t ignore it anymore, Severus. The summer before last is a blur, too. And I could *swear* I went home for the holidays in sixth year, but I remember it indistinctly, like it happened twenty years ago. It just doesn’t add up...”

“What exactly are you saying, Remus?” Severus asked slowly. “Are you telling me that you think this isn’t real?”

“I think that depends on what you mean by *real*.” Remus reached out for Severus, as if to prove

how real he was. “But I don’t think this place operates the same way as the world we came from.”

Remus had never seen Severus so frightened — not even at the wolf. He wanted to make the fear stop. He never wanted to see it again.

“What happens to us, then?” Severus asked. His voice was barely audible, but Remus felt the words resound in his chest as if they had been fired from a cannon.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe we go back.”

“Back where?” Severus demanded. “Backward, or forward?”

“I don’t know. I’m all turned around. Every question leads to a dozen more, and those are only the questions I’m not afraid to ask. And then — I’m not even sure we’re asking the right questions. We’ve ignored the most important one. It’s right there, Severus, it’s eating at me, but I’m still too frightened to say it out loud.” He silently implored Severus to read his thoughts, to understand.

“Ask,” Severus said. Remus chewed the inside of his lip; he might have chewed right through it if he didn’t force himself to speak.

“We’ve asked *how* this happened, and *what* will happen, and all sorts of moral-philosophical questions with *could* and *should*, but what about *why*? Why is this happening? *Why us*?”

“Why us?”

“Yes. Why? Why is it only the two of us, out of all people? Don’t you ever wonder what we’re doing here, Severus?”

“I...” Severus looked away from him. “I can’t.” He stood.

“Severus — ”

“I’m leaving now. Please don’t follow me. And for God’s sake, don’t spy on me with your bloody map.”

“Okay,” Remus said desperately, “I won’t, but — ”

“I do not wish to discuss this.” He must have noticed the way Remus deflated, because he softened slightly. “I don’t mean *ever*. I just mean... for now.”

There may not be an ever, Remus thought. *What if there’s only now?* But Remus didn’t say that. He barely managed a second, “Okay.”

Remus didn’t actually want to follow Severus, anyway. He didn’t want to be around anyone, but he couldn’t sit still any longer either. He spent some time wandering aimlessly around the grounds until the tension at last began to melt from his body. Eventually, as always, he ended up back by the lake. Remus stared, transfixed by the rain that dimpled the surface. He hadn’t even felt the water on his skin — living in Scotland, he was used to being slightly damp at all times — but there it was. It was only when he saw the rain falling that he realised he was soaked through.

“Dreary, isn’t it?”

Remus started. How long had Moaning Myrtle been hovering beside him?

“I got flushed,” she sighed, by way of explanation.

"I think it's rather beautiful, in a melancholy way," Remus said. "I mean the scenery, not the flushing," he added hastily.

"You would," Myrtle said with affection. "Everything beautiful makes me melancholy, but most people think I'm touched in the head."

"I don't," Remus said. "I think that's a very poetic sentiment." Abruptly, he faced her. As the rain passed through her form, it briefly turned to shimmering ice that melted again before it hit the ground. Remus followed it with his eyes, entranced. "You know about me, don't you?" he asked.

"Know what?" Myrtle peered at him owlshly.

"You *know*. I'm sure that you do. There was a time, two years back — you said that I was different. You said that something about me had changed. You were right, Myrtle. Did you know the truth, even back then?"

"Oh. You mean that you're a ghost, too?"

Remus froze. "What do you mean?"

"I know you don't belong here, Remus Lupin. You remember things that other people don't. You're caught between worlds, just like me. That makes you a ghost, of sorts. Don't you think?"

"I'm not dead," Remus said frantically.

"No," Myrtle agreed with a far-off, wistful expression, "you're not." She sighed. "What fun it would be if you were. I think I'd like to have a friend."

The next time Remus found Severus under their tree, he didn't bother coming up with a pretence to sit.

"Listen, I've been thinking," Remus said without preamble. "We should have a codeword. I'm not saying it *will* happen, but just in case — in case we're separated by time or space, when we come across one another again, we should have a way of making sure that you're the same you from this timeline, and I'm the same me."

"Questions are more secure. You were in the Order, you really ought to know this."

"Yes, questions are better, if you can work them into a conversation organically. But that might not be possible; we're playing with time paradoxes here. If you're *not* the right you, I wouldn't want to tip you off by asking you what Amortentia smells like to me or some such. Humour me."

Severus' lips twitched in amusement, and Remus knew that he'd won. "Very well. What did you have in mind?"

Remus looked about for inspiration. He hadn't thought that far ahead. His eyes lingered on a flame-bright cluster of flowers nearby. "What about poppy?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Perhaps something that's *not* the given name of a mutual acquaintance?"

"Oh. Right." Remus continued to scan the lawn. "Buttercup?"

“Pray tell, how are you going to organically work that into a conversation with me?”

Remus shrugged. ““Severus, tell me, are there any potions that use buttercups as an ingredient?””

“I *would* be suspicious at such a stupid question, even coming from you...”

““Severus, Teddy just ate a fistful of buttercups. Should I be concerned?””

“Why would you come to me for medical advice about your child? I should hope you’d call a professional.”

““Severus, I’ve been looking through curtain swatches, and I can’t decide between buttercup yellow and poppy red. What do you think?””

“Ask someone else. I’m colour blind. Can’t see red or green.”

“Really? I never knew.”

Severus smirked wryly. “If I ever let it get out, there would be no end to people trying to swap out my things for Gryffindor colours.”

“Damn. You’re right. James would have had a field day with that one. Well, I guess I’ll have to go with the buttercup yellow, then.”

“Yes, in this completely fictitious interior design situation you’ve constructed.”

“How about ‘Severus, could you butter a couple of pieces of toast for me while you’re up?’”

Severus snorted. “So, in this scenario, we’re having breakfast together?”

“Well, yes. I had rather hoped there might be a few breakfasts in our future. Preferably in bed...”

Severus flushed. “Now you’re teasing me.”

“No,” Remus said. “Well, yes. A little. But I’m very serious, too.”

“Fine. Buttercup. I doubt we’ll ever have occasion to use it, but if it makes you happy, we’ll have a codeword.”

Remus smiled. “It does make me happy.”

“Good.” Severus rolled his eyes spectacularly. “After all, what is my purpose, if not to make Remus Lupin happy?”

“Finally you understand,” Remus said, before shutting him up with a kiss.

Graduate: it was both a verb, what they had all done the previous day, and a noun, what they would henceforth be. Graduated: there were quite a few graduated flasks in the Potions classroom. Also, to graduate: to change, little by little, as in a gradient; to transform from Point A to Point B by degrees. Gradually. In that sense, Remus had indeed graduated, so subtly that he’d never realised it was happening; now here he was, full to the last degree.

The mood had been sombre for most of the week. Exams ended on Friday, and they would depart the school on Sunday afternoon, meaning that Saturday was devoted to packing, farewelling, and reminiscing. In the evening, Remus went to Severus for his nightly dose of Wolfsbane. This was an act of optimism; neither knew whether it would be possible for Remus to take his final three doses before the full moon. When Remus left his dorm, his friends bemoaned him breaking up their card game and asked where he was going that was *so* much more important. “I’m meeting Severus,” Remus said simply. Their response was no more than a couple of huffs and downcast eyes. So that was that, then. The thing he had been so worried about. Another anti-climax.

When Remus returned, all of the seventh-years were in the girls’ dorm, where Lily was teaching them how to play Twister with a transfigured mat; this later segued into a game of Sardines that spanned the entirety of Gryffindor Tower and drew in students from every year (despite Lily’s half-hearted insistence that firsties should be in bed). Remus’ rather devious *coup de grâce* was to hide behind James’ bed while James and Lily, having retired from the game, cuddled under the duvet; at first everyone who entered the room slammed the door shut again with flustered apologies, until eventually they realised that there was nowhere else Remus could be hiding. For the last time, Remus let himself pretend that he really was a child again.

The self-proclaimed Marauders didn’t sleep at all that night, from some combination of nerves and wanting to savour every moment of their final night together. In the morning, they would no longer be a unit in the way they had been. They would no longer fall asleep listening to one another breathing; mingle the smells of their dirty laundry and adolescent sweat until none of them noticed anymore; constantly trip over each other’s feet and snap without really meaning it; wake up and eat three meals and go to bed again knowing that all of their friends were safe and near. Remus, the only one who had been through all this before, was the one that seemed to feel it most keenly. He didn’t want the night to end. He didn’t want to say goodbye.

Their last breakfast in the Great Hall was like a Greatest Hits compilation of Hogwarts breakfasts. Black and white pudding, sausages, bacon, and haggis; tattie scones and grilled tomatoes; eggs poached, fried and scrambled; fresh fruit and every type of jam; and — though it felt like the breakfast food equivalent of a non sequitur — sugary waffles, because it was a Sunday. Partway through the meal a small, steaming plate appeared directly in front of Remus. He lifted the cloth napkin — covertly, so as not to arouse envy in his tablemates — and grinned. Underneath he found a modest heap of fried laverbread that the house elves must have prepared specially for him. He had rapturously praised the virtuosity of their breakfasts when he’d visited the kitchens for a round of maudlin farewells.

As he gave his trunk a final once-over, Remus turned up the little pot of gold glitter, secured within an ancient pair of socks. It had sat there untouched for the past year, and Remus suddenly got the idea of bequeathing it to Mary MacDonald. Mary convinced her dorm mates to let her paint them with it, and when she offered it to a hesitant Remus, Sirius jumped in and cried “Yes please!” — which was how *all* of the seventh-year Gryffindors ended up covered in lustrous gold as they performed the silly and sacred ritual passed down through generations of Gryffindor graduates: climbing up to the crawlspace at the top of the tower and roaring out the windows at the top of their lungs. Remus grew hoarse and dizzy from laughing. They were so young and bold and golden and beautiful, eight little lion cubs ready to take on the world. This was the last time they would all be together.

And then — it was done, and it was time to go.

They spilled forth from the front doors onto the sunlit grass for the last time. Goodbyes said out on the lawn weren’t *final* goodbyes, since they were all getting on the same train, but there was still a certain symbolism to the moment when the departing seventh-years left the rest of the students

behind at the carriages. Remus stood contemplating the thestrals for a minute before Lily tugged his sleeve. "They're beautiful, I know," she whispered, "but the others have gone ahead already."

Remus jerked toward her, surprised. "You can see them?" he asked. Lily only shrugged enigmatically, leading him on toward the banks of the lake, where a small fleet of boats stood ready to carry the new graduates over the water. The vessels floated weightlessly on the surface, an effect of the enchantment that would impel them back across the lake, just like on the night they'd first arrived. For a moment, all the Gryffindors stood together, as if no one wanted to be the first to break away. Then James grinned and took off for the very farthest boat, and Sirius took chase in an impromptu footrace. Mary linked arms with her Ravenclaw beau, and the other Gryffindor girls went off with friends from Hufflepuff. Remus wanted to believe that in the end, the old House divisions no longer mattered, but he knew that wasn't true.

Of course it wasn't true. Remus knew it the moment he heard a loathsome voice a few metres behind him bark, "Snape! Hurry up, would you?" It made Remus' hackles rise and his spine stiffen. He spun about in time to catch Mulciber grousing about getting to the train before all the 'good' carriages were full. Severus was dragging his feet behind the other Slytherin boys, his face a perfect mask of indifference. Remus tried for a moment to catch his eye, but Severus wisely did not look over to where the Gryffindors had gathered.

This was it: the moment their paths diverged, at least for the time being. Once they left behind the relative freedom of Hogwarts, they would have to be careful not to let on that they were anything other than old school rivals. Severus had so much work to do, alliances to forge, allegiances to balance; and Remus had to stay afloat as well. Remus averted his gaze and turned his back to Severus, as he had done so many times before.

The knowledge that they had agreed to this together did nothing to dull the pain of his breaking heart.

Remus climbed into the boat where James, Sirius and Peter awaited him. He drank in his fill of their shining faces and the sunlight on the loch, and it eased his pain a little. He felt the boat lurch slightly behind him as Lily made to get in. Then she paused, half in and half out. Remus turned toward her, curious.

Lily's voice rang out like a bell. "Hey, Sev!" she called. Severus snapped to attention so quickly you'd think she had tugged on his marionette strings. Remus thought he heard Avery mutter something that sounded a lot like 'Mudblood whore.' "Want to join us? We've got room for one more."

Severus stared at Lily, frozen in his tracks. Mulciber rolled his eyes. "Come on, Snape," he said impatiently.

"Come with us, Severus," Lily insisted. Remus risked a glance at his friends in the boat, but they were all looking pointedly at other things.

"Snape!" Avery snapped. This seemed to break Severus from his trance. He looked at Avery. He looked at Mulciber. He looked at the other Slytherin boys, already piled into their boat. He looked at Lily. He took a step toward Lily. Lily stretched out her hand.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Mulciber groaned. "Just leave him. Let's go. Bloody half-breeds, they're all the same..."

Severus took Lily's hand. Remus' breath caught in his throat as he watched Lily help Severus into the boat and pull him into a tight embrace. "Thank you," she whispered. Then James stuck out his

hand and thanked Severus too, and that was funny, what did James have to thank him for? Even Peter, ever following James' lead, extended his hand for a tepid shake, and Sirius nodded curtly, which was really the best one could hope for from Sirius. Then it was Remus' turn, and his heart battered against his chest but he didn't care anymore, because he was golden and emboldened and beautiful and free, and he launched himself at Severus, clinging to him like a drowning man, and kissed him with the force of a wave crashing on sand, towing him in like the tide. In, and under; and suddenly he felt he *was* drowning, and everything was blue, and he thought maybe he was dying of happiness. Someone was calling his name. When he opened his eyes again he knew he wasn't really underwater because he was breathing, but it was murky, and everything sounded far away.

"Someone — help! Please, I need you to fetch a Healer..."

Remus tried to focus his eyes on the blurry form that loomed above him. "Prongs?" he asked, or tried to.

"Remus! — Oh, God, is someone on the way? — Remus, it's me. It's Harry."

Harry. Of course it was Harry. Remus could see that now. How wonderful! It had been so long. He closed his eyes again and saw the boat, and he was both in it and watching it from a distance. He was overwhelmed by all the love he felt, such love, love that didn't pull him in different directions but girded him from all sides, making him whole.

Strange, how he had lived most of his life without romantic love — a handful of wretched and short-lived attempts notwithstanding — only to fall helplessly, deeply in love twice in the span of five years. He knew it was more than just luck of the draw. It was him. *He* had changed, miraculously transforming into the sort of person who knew how to love and be loved in return, though he still didn't quite understand how he had done it. But he knew it, just as he knew that had he not first loved Nymphadora Tonks, his heart would never have been opened to loving Severus Snape. People often use the metaphor of tearing down defences when they describe the process of learning to love, but that wasn't it at all. Remus had drawn courage from every person he loved: his family, his friends, his lovers, his child. With each new love that entered his heart he had been fortified, not worn down; and for the first time in his life, he felt unbreakable.

Remus gasped, like one who rises above the surface for an instant before plunging down again. If Harry was here, that meant...

"Teddy?" Remus croaked. His throat was awfully dry for a drowning man.

"Yes," Harry said. He seemed to be crying. How strange. "Yes, Teddy will be here in the morning."

Remus smiled to himself before drifting back into the depths.

...and I'll be in Scotland afore ye

He was in a shallow sleep now, clinging to it, as he often did in his dorm when he wasn't quite ready to let go of his morning solitude. But he wasn't in the dorm anymore. He was snoozing on the train, surrounded by the sound of his friends' laughter, affectionate laughter, never cruel anymore. His head resting on Severus' lap... Severus' hands stroking his hair, scratching him behind the ear like a puppy and sending a decidedly human shiver down his spine...

Shallow sleep; deep breaths. He was being lured away little by little, one hand holding on, the other reaching out with longing for the next sweet dream. It was better than waking to the smell of fresh coffee; better than waking in a lover's arms; better than the first day of school: the gentle sound of a babbling baby. *His* baby.

It was not a dream. He reached up to rub his tired eyes, then paused abruptly, staring at his unblemished left hand. He tilted it toward the light, examining the shiny skin and unbroken lines of his palm. His body felt drained, like he'd just been through his change twice in one night.

"Remus?" a soft voice called. Harry. Remus dropped his hand and snapped to attention. Yes, Harry was sitting at his bedside, and in Harry's arms, focused intently on feeding from a bottle, Teddy.

He was so much bigger than Remus remembered. Teddy's eyes fixed on Remus, tracking his movements somewhat loosely as he struggled (and failed) to sit up. They were green. Not a fathomless green like Lily's eyes, or Harry's; foggy grey-green like Remus' mother's. Then Teddy laughed, and the earth fell away beneath him. It was the most beautiful thing Remus had ever seen.

Harry cleared his throat as he stashed the emptied bottle away. "Don't worry, he knows you," he said. "He comes to visit at least every other day."

Remus smiled weakly. "I suppose it must be a shock to see me awake," he said. His voice sounded strange to his own ears, broken from disuse.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know if he's old enough to feel shock yet. He certainly seems happy, though."

Remus managed to tear his gaze away from Teddy long enough to study Harry's face. Harry looked — well, not older, but aged, like he hadn't slept in months. Remus wondered if Harry's hair would start greying soon, like his own had. He recalled the dismay he'd felt the morning he discovered that first wiry silver strand. It was hardly the worst thing in Remus' life at that point, but it had given him something concrete to focus his depression on; concrete, and easily banished with a bottle of cheap chemicals. Remus didn't think Harry would ever bother to dye his hair. He'd never been the type to worry about his looks. He'd never been the type to worry about himself at all.

"Remus?"

"Sorry. Just woke up and already lost in thought."

"Don't apologise. I'm sure this must be disorienting." Harry's voice was hushed, calm. When had he developed such a soothing bedside manner?

"Have you been looking after him...?"

"Whenever I can, and I usually bring him to visit you. But he lives with his grandmother. Erm, I mean Andromeda."

Andromeda. Right. Remus remembered the important question he needed to ask. "Where is Dora...?" he began. Harry's face crumpled. He parted his lips as if to speak, but Remus interrupted. "No, sorry. I know. I remember. I mean to ask, what have they done with her body?" He choked on the word 'body.' He'd thought he was more prepared to say it than he was.

"Oh," Harry said, his tension dissolving into gentleness. "She was cremated. Andromeda has been keeping her ashes until you — until you could..."

"Good," Remus said. A little weight lifted from his shoulders. "I'm very grateful."

"The memorial service was beautiful. It isn't fair you didn't get to go. I can show you, if you like, when you're ready. I mean, with a pensieve."

“That would be wonderful, Harry,” Remus said, struck by his thoughtfulness.

Harry cleared his throat again, pretending not to be on the verge of tears. “I suppose you might want to know what happened to you, too,” he said.

“I hadn’t thought of it,” Remus said, only half joking, “but now that you mention it, why not?”

“You’ve been in a magically induced coma,” Harry said, getting right to it. “The healers said there was no other way — you were hit with so many different curses, it seemed like every time they began the healing process for one it would counteract another.”

“I trust they made the right decision,” Remus said mildly. “I seem to be more or less alive, now.”

“Yes,” Harry replied with a little smile.

“How long has it been?” Remus asked, looking at Teddy again.

“Just shy of four months. It’s the seventh of September.”

“Ah.” Remus wasn’t entirely surprised by any of this. He tried to rapidly reconcile the timeframe in his mind. Four full moons here; twenty-nine in the other place. It *nearly* lined up harmoniously — had it been twenty-eight, that would have been a ratio of one to seven, that most magical of numbers. But then, very little in his life had ever been logical or harmonious. “Four full moons,” Remus said aloud as he calculated.

“Five, counting last night,” Harry said. Ah. Of course. “Actually, I was going to say — technically, you weren’t out the entire time. They had to re-induce the coma after every full moon. Until last night, that is. You actually spoke to me just before you changed — I don’t know if you remember. The healers said you were ready...” Harry grimaced. “You seemed... almost aware every time you transformed. Not while you were, erm, you know, the wolf; just during the transformation itself.”

“You were there?” Remus asked.

“Yes,” Harry said, “every time.”

Tears were stinging Remus’ eyes, burning at the back of his nasal passage. He heard James’ voice in his ear. *I’ll come find you, every month. We’ll run together. I promise.* In that moment, Remus felt a surge of protective instinct that would have knocked him flat had he not already been supine, and he knew that he loved James and Lily’s child almost as fiercely as his own. “Thank you,” he whispered. Then, gathering a bit more strength, he said, “I think I remember changing — at least, I remember the pain. The sensation of not being able to move. I remember, sometimes, hearing someone call my name. I suppose that must have been you.”

“Might have been,” Harry said, turning red. “It — looked like it hurt. A lot.”

“It does,” Remus confirmed. “Harry, I’m so touched to know that you’ve been looking after me. I can only imagine how busy you’ve been in the last four months. You must be feeling overwhelmed. You really didn’t need to take so much time out just to — ”

“Stop,” Harry said. “We’re family now” — Harry inclined his head toward Teddy — “and that’s what families do.”

“Okay,” Remus whispered. It was just what he’d hoped Harry would say; but there was still a part of him — a small, self-doubting, self-loathing part of him — that needed to be reassured. Perhaps one day soon, he would completely lose the instinct to make himself small. Perhaps this might

even be the last time. “Well,” Remus said, “thank you, in any case.”

“Do you want to hold Teddy? I can help get you propped up,” Harry offered.

“Yes, please,” Remus said with a smile. Harry retrieved an extra pillow and helped him shift into a more upright position. It was a bit uncomfortable to move, but Remus felt all right once he was settled again.

“Here,” Harry said, handing Teddy over to him. Remus’ heart skipped a beat.

“Goodness, he’s gotten heavier.”

“Yes,” Harry said, “babies have a way of doing that.”

“You know, Harry, I remember holding you when you were this age.”

“Really?” Harry asked, sounding more surprised than Remus would have thought. Remus didn’t try to read his expression. He couldn’t look away from Teddy’s face.

“Mmhmm. Your father taught me how to change a nappy. I could still hear him laughing at me the first time I changed Teddy.”

“I didn’t know that,” Harry said quietly. “Err, it’s just, you don’t really talk about my mum and dad all that often.”

This did cause Remus to look up and meet Harry’s eyes. “No, I suppose I haven’t. Well, I can certainly try to get more into the habit.”

“Okay. Yeah,” Harry said. “I’d like that.”

Teddy made a noise, as if to complain about Remus’ divided attention. Remus gazed back down at him. Teddy babbled away, producing an excess of remarkably clear and pure spittle. Remus smiled so wide he thought the corners of his mouth might split, and Teddy mirrored his expression. Remus gasped. “Is that a tooth coming in?”

“Is it?!” Harry cried, leaning over to see. “Andromeda said she thought he was teething, but I don’t really know much about how that works...”

Remus pointed out the tiny eruption of tooth. He was warmed by Harry’s genuine excitement. So, Remus had been the first adult to notice. It made him almost giddy to know that there were still ‘firsts’ he hadn’t missed out on. It wasn’t too late. Remus hadn’t known that he could feel this way; that a simple, natural bodily function could fill him with pride, and so much joy that he wanted to shout it from the rooftops. He couldn’t wait to share the news. He couldn’t wait to tell —

“Severus!” Remus exclaimed. Of course. He needed to find Severus.

The smile fell from Harry’s face. “What?” he asked.

“Severus,” Remus repeated. “Have you seen him? How is he? Where is he?”

Harry sat back in his chair. “Oh. I’m sorry, I guess you don’t remember,” he said. “Erm, that is... Snape didn’t — I mean, he — he didn’t make it.”

“Pardon?” Remus asked, smile still plastered to his face.

“He’s dead,” Harry said simply.

Remus stared at him. He shook his head slowly. "No, he's not," he said.

Harry's eyes looked a bit glassy. "I'm sorry," Harry said. "It happened during the last battle."

During the battle? But that was four months ago! "No," Remus said again. "No, you're mistaken. I just saw him."

Harry's brow furrowed, and Remus realised too late how nonsensical that must sound. "I'm sorry," Harry said. "He died bravely."

Remus shook his head more vigorously. His breath was coming in little gulps, shorter and shorter. "He didn't, though," he said. "He couldn't have."

"I was with him, Remus," Harry said quietly. "I saw it happen."

"It must have been a trick. An illusion. A plan. He's always got a plan," Remus rambled. Even to his own ears, it sounded like a plea. *Denial... Bargaining... shut UP, Voice, shut up and go away, I don't need this from you now...!*

There was something in Harry's eyes that Remus had never seen there before. He looked almost as if he *pitied* Remus. How could that be? How *dare* he? "Remus," Harry said gently, "I saw his body. We buried him."

"No." *Anger...* so much anger. Remus wanted to scream at Harry, to punish him for saying such horrible things. "Why are you doing this to me?" he whimpered. He'd meant it to sound firm and forceful, but his larynx betrayed him.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated helplessly, "I'm sorry. I didn't realise that you were... friends?" In an undertone, as if to himself, he added, "I guess there was a lot I never realised about him..."

These last words were nigh incomprehensible to Remus, but he barely registered them. Remus was blubbing now, shaking. Teddy, disturbed by the unsteady motion, began to wail.

"Here, why don't you let me take Teddy for a minute?" Harry asked, reaching out.

"NO!" Remus cried, tightening his grip around Teddy and feebly twisting his upper body away. "He's — my — baby," he managed to gasp as Teddy's screams escalated. "I can... I should be able to calm him down..."

"Remus," Harry pleaded.

Remus sobbed. This was all wrong. Of all the possible solutions, the possible futures they had imagined together, he had never considered this one. He'd never imagined that he would be left alone. This was Hell. It had to be. Severus had been right, then; they had been sent to Hell, and this separation was their punishment. How very, very foolish Remus had been to think that they could weather this, that their fledgling love would be strong enough to withstand the storm. That kind of happiness wasn't for them. It never had been. Remus had tasted it briefly, just long enough to feel the lack of it; now he was abandoned to his longing forever and ever...

Remus heard Harry gasp; the sound cut through his inner turbulence. He glanced down to see that Teddy had possetted all over the front of his hospital gown. Already Teddy's face was losing its purple hue, his piercing cries quieting to a moderate gurgle, his round eyes opening and winking again. *Stupid*, Remus berated himself. Of course this wasn't Hell. His child wouldn't be in Hell with him. He tucked his chin to examine the milky regurgitation and watched commingled tears and mucus drip from his own face. There was quite enough bodily fluid under his nose to convince

him that they were, indeed, still very much alive. Teddy was looking into his eyes, as if he had been trying to prove a point and now awaited his reaction.

Remus did the only thing he could: he gave his child a weak and broken laugh.

They spent nearly all of December touring Australia. It was meant to be a short trip, but the longer they stayed, the more Remus wanted to explore, and Teddy turned out to be a very amenable traveller. Remus luxuriated in the sunlight and warmth, and the warm feeling he got when he had his son all to himself. Of course he would forever be grateful to Andromeda, Harry, Molly, and the rest for taking care of Teddy while he was incapacitated; but now was the time to be selfish with his child's attention while he still could. They had so much time to make up.

It was, admittedly, a rather lavish holiday for a recovering invalid and an eight-month-old who would retain nothing of it, but Remus didn't mind what other people thought. Besides, everyone who mattered knew the real purpose of this trip. That didn't stop Remus and Teddy from enjoying themselves. They spent their last week by the coast. Teddy was enamoured with the beach, having never experienced sand that was smooth and hot to the touch, or waves that didn't nip at his toes with cold. They spent quite a lot of time lounging at the edge of the water, where it was only a few inches deep. Remus was content just to feel the sun on his face and the water lapping at his legs, watching Teddy laugh as he created little hills in the gloopy sand and raced against the waves to see who could demolish them fastest.

Remus liked to watch the tide come and go. He had always felt a special sort of kinship with the ocean, which was governed by the moon, like him. And yet that cosmic pull was also what made it breathe, gave it its life-sustaining power, made it a force to be reckoned with. Like him.

Teddy started to get wiggly, and Remus noticed that the pads of his feet were turning red. He hadn't even thought to put sunscreen on the bottom of his child's feet. There were so many things to learn about being a parent; so many little details that could only be learned through trial and error. Remus seemed to stumble into some new discovery at least once an hour. He wondered if the pace would ever slow down. He secretly hoped it wouldn't.

On their next-to-last day in Queensland, Remus did what he'd come there to do. He set out in the morning with Teddy strapped securely to his chest and a broom he had 'borrowed' from Grimmauld Place. The baby books would advise against flying with such a young child, but Remus felt secure enough in his skills, even given his recent recovery. Besides, with Harry as his godfather, Teddy would no doubt be speeding around on a broomstick soon enough — if he hadn't already done so.

Remus set out from a shaded spot, but he was still careful with his Disillusionment charm. It wouldn't do for him to be spotted by a boatful of tourists down below.

He had hoped to beat the heat of the summer sun, but he was already sweating by the time he reached his destination. Not that he had a specific destination in mind, only someplace along the Great Barrier Reef; he stopped when it felt right to him. The water below was stunningly vibrant. Someday, when Teddy was old enough, he thought he'd like to come back and try snorkelling.

Tonks had always wanted to see this place. That was what brought them here now. Balancing carefully on his suspended broom, Remus pulled out the lacquered box that contained his wife's

ashes. Some people wanted their ashes scattered in places they'd loved in life; Remus thought that one day, he would want that for himself. Tonks had wanted her ashes to go somewhere she had never been. She'd always kept a running list of travel destinations, places she dreamed of visiting when the war was over. If that was not to be, she'd said, at least she could have one last adventure.

Remus had initially planned to do it at the beginning of their trip, but he had stalled. It had been comforting, in a strange way, to know that she was there with them. Now, though, it was time to let go.

Teddy made a small noise, and Remus looked down at his child. Teddy looked back at him, winking against the sunlight. He'd been so quiet, Remus had thought he was sleeping. He bowed his neck forward and kissed Teddy on the top of his head. Then, with his wand in his left hand and the box in his right, he conjured a small breeze that blew away from their bodies. He unlatched the box and let the ashes lift and scatter on the wind. Moving swiftly, he flicked his wand at them, transfiguring the ashes into droplets of water. For just a moment, a rainbow glimmered in the wall of vapour; then the water dispersed into the ocean air.

The first Christmas post-victory was shaping up to be much busier than Remus had anticipated. He'd spent a quiet morning at Andromeda's, opening gifts with Teddy; though Teddy was still too young to grasp the concept, he was enthralled by all the colourful paper. At eight months, most of the gifts were practical items, as much for Remus as they were for Teddy. Later, they would go to Christmas dinner with Harry and the Weasleys. In between, though, Remus and Teddy had a special invitation to tea at Hogwarts.

Remus felt a familiar flutter of excitement as he stepped onto the school grounds. It was the first time he'd been back since waking up. You would hardly know there had been any disturbance there. Remus knew that inside the walls the long work of restoration still carried on, but from the exterior, the castle and its surroundings looked pristine. Taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders, Remus approached the entrance. Teddy, strapped to his stomach in his carrier, sensed Remus' shift in posture and began to squirm as well.

Remus arrived at the gargoyle on the third floor and spoke the password: "Edith Pechey!" He called out a "hello" as he mounted the stairs. Minerva was waiting for him at the top; she clasped his hands in greeting before stepping aside to let him in. Remus drank in the sight of the Headmaster's Office. It had been years since he'd last visited. The space was more neatly ordered than it had been under Albus Dumbledore, more functional and homey, but Remus still felt the same sense of wonder he did every time he stepped into the vast circular room. He went automatically over to the desk and sat opposite the Headmistress' chair.

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "I haven't called you here to give you a detention," she said. "I think we'll be more comfortable over by the sitting area, don't you?"

"Right," said Remus, flushing. "Old habits."

Minerva escorted him to a cozy alcove that wasn't visible from her desk. Along the way, they passed the portraits of former Headmasters that lined the wall. Remus met their eyes uneasily as he walked by. Then he stopped in his tracks, shivering.

At the end of the row was an empty frame. Not in the sense magical folk normally mean when

they say a portrait frame is empty, i.e. that the subject is off in another painting sipping watercolour tea. No, this was just a dark wood frame, subtly ornate but modern in its style, with no canvas in the middle. The bottom of the frame was inscribed *Severus Snape, 1997—1998*. Remus reached out to touch the name with the pad of his thumb. “I think he would have liked this,” Remus said. “Even if he might have groused about it. He did have a poetic streak.”

Minerva gave Remus an odd look. “I thought so, too. I hope he wouldn’t mind too much.”

“But then, it isn’t really for him, is it? It’s for the living.”

“Aye.” They didn’t speak for a moment; not because they couldn’t find anything to say, but because they didn’t need to. Then Minerva ushered Remus to sit. Remus withdrew a palm-sized baby swing from his bag, unshrunk it, and set it up for Teddy before choosing a chair for himself. A tray of tea and cakes appeared the moment his bum hit the upholstery.

“No caramel wafers?” Remus asked, pouting ever so slightly. Minerva rolled her eyes and murmured something about cheek, but she still summoned a package of Tunnock’s Caramel Wafers from her desk drawer.

They chatted for several minutes about easy subjects like Remus’ health and the reconstruction efforts at Hogwarts — that is, massively consequential subjects that suddenly seemed easy after everything they’d been through. From there they moved on to the equally cheery topic of single parenthood, which, unbeknownst to Remus, steered the conversation in exactly the direction Minerva had intended all along.

“I know you’ve had your hands full these last few months,” Minerva began, “but have you thought about what you’re going to do now that the war is over? I mean, in the longterm?”

“I have thought about it. Naturally,” said Remus, immediately wary. He suddenly felt he was being interrogated, as with all of those excruciating *what will you do next?* conversations he’d had to sit through back in seventh year. “Right now, Teddy is my first priority.”

“Quite rightly,” Minerva said, smiling. “Remus, I must come clean and tell you that I had a bit of an agenda in inviting you here today. You see, I’d like to offer you a position.”

“A position?” Remus repeated.

“A teaching position,” Minerva clarified, in response to Remus’ stupefaction.

Remus paused to find the right words. “Minerva,” he said, “I’m flattered. But you’ll recall that my previous employment here didn’t end on the best of terms. And, what with Teddy, and all of my health considerations, I’m really not sure I’m the best candidate to teach Defence anymore...”

“Forgive me; I ought to have been more specific. I’m offering you the Transfiguration professorship.”

“But that’s your job!” Remus blurted stupidly.

Minerva chuckled. “And I treasured it for many years. In fact, I still remember teaching a remarkably talented young man by the name of Remus Lupin. You did achieve ‘O’s on your O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

“Yes. Transfiguration was my only ‘O,’ apart from Defence,” Remus said modestly.

“Remus, I wouldn’t offer you a position if you weren’t qualified to take it on, so kindly banish any

such notions from your head. The truth is, you would be doing me a favour. We have a pressing need for someone to fill the role next September. I've committed to supervising the N.E.W.T.-level students through the end of the current year, but that won't be tenable in the long run. Filius and Horace have generously stepped in to teach the lower levels, but I can't ask them to carry on for another year."

"Goodness. You're all doing double duty?"

Minerva nodded. "There wasn't much time to make arrangements — we still weren't certain that the school would be ready to reopen until late in the summer. Dear Horace always did have a knack for Transfiguration, but as you might imagine, he isn't thrilled about the extra workload."

"No, I would imagine not," Remus said, smiling faintly. "Actually," he continued, "speaking of Professor — erm, Horace — I've been meaning to get in touch with him. Perhaps when he returns from his holiday. You see, I know this might sound mad, but I've been thinking about finally taking the Potions N.E.W.T."

Minerva's eyebrows shot up. "Really? I'd no idea you had an interest in Potions."

"I didn't, back in school. I regret that now." Remus flushed. It was the first time he'd spoken the idea out loud, and he felt rather silly.

"Well, I think that's marvellous," Minerva said. "It's never too late to further your education."

"That's what I was hoping," Remus said.

Minerva got a rather mischievous glint in her eyes. "Don't tell me you're angling for Horace's job, Remus."

"You never know," Remus said, grinning. "I wouldn't rule it out."

"Well, in any case, I hope you'll consider my offer. You don't need to decide right now, but if you could let us know by the end of January so that we can widen our search if need be..."

Remus grew serious again. "Thank you, Minerva. I will consider it."

They gossiped for a while about Remus' former colleagues, and then it was time for Minerva to return to her duties — trying to create a festive atmosphere for the few forlorn students who were staying over the holiday. Remus asked permission to stay and wander the grounds a while longer, which Minerva happily granted, handing him a visitor badge (one of several new security measures at the school). It was stamped with '*Remus Lupin, Nostalgic Ramble.*' Teddy received a badge that read '*Teddy Tonks-Lupin, Along For The Ride.*' On his way out the door, Remus turned back. "I suppose you would make provisions for my — er —"

"The school will provide you with Wolfsbane Potion, should you choose to return. I've already begun to make enquiries — discreetly, of course."

"Thank you," said Remus. "And the old Shack...?"

"Demolished. I'm sure we can find more comfortable accommodations for you."

"I see." Remus mulled this over for a moment, and decided he felt no regret at the loss. "I suppose Teddy will be old enough for childcare by next September."

"I have a few promising leads. Perhaps I should have mentioned that earlier."

"I see," Remus said again. He took a deep breath, heart pounding rapidly. "Then, actually, I don't need to think it over. I accept."

Minerva looked surprised. "As I said, there's no need to decide today. I'm certainly not about to spend my Christmas filing paperwork."

"I know, but I think — no, I know this is where I want to be. It was just unexpected, is all."

Minerva smiled. "Well, if you're certain..." She looked sincerely happy, and Remus felt himself smiling in return. "I'll be glad to have you back. Very glad. Happy Christmas, Professor Lupin."

"Happy Christmas, Headmistress. Thank you for your confidence in me."

Remus' feet seemed to carry him of their own accord through the corridors as his mind wandered. He passed his old Defence classroom, and the staffroom, and even popped down to the dungeons to see the Potions lab. No mistletoe in sight. He paused, only for a moment, outside the entrance to Severus' old quarters, but the old stone walls bore no lingering trace of the man. Then he went to the kitchens to deliver a stack of holiday cards to the house elves, apologising profusely for having missed the last two years. Lissy the elf, who was now Executive Pastry Chef as well as Hogwarts' finest dancer, and who looked a great deal older and more careworn than when Remus had seen her last, only laughed grimly and slipped a large handful of sweets into Remus' baby bag when he wasn't paying attention. Teddy had never seen a house elf (as far as Remus knew) and he was immediately taken with them. Yes, Remus thought, this would be a very nice place to grow up.

He thought fleetingly of going up to the Astronomy Tower, but his stiff legs didn't feel up to the walk. Anyway, if he didn't see it for himself, then he could still imagine the mistletoe blooming there.

Remus had one more stop to make before he left the school. He made his way to the loo and, scanning to make sure the room was empty, locked himself inside. Moving to the far wall out of habit, he gently called out, "Myrtle?"

He heard a noise. Pushing open the door to his old crying stall, he watched Myrtle languorously emerge from the toilet with a yawn and a stretch. She blinked at him in confusion. "Remus Lupin, Gryffindor, 1978, Prefect, Ex-Professor and Werewolf?"

"Erm, yes. That's me. You can just call me Remus, though, if you like."

Myrtle studied him for a moment, with the hazy look of someone who's just woken up (*did* she have a bed tucked away somewhere, after all?), before lighting with enthusiasm. "A baby!" she squealed. "Where'd you get one of those?"

"Oh. Erm, in the usual way. Myrtle, this is my son, Teddy."

"He's *darling*!" Myrtle cooed, drifting closer. Teddy stared at her in wide-eyed fascination. He'd never seen a ghost before, either. Myrtle did a few little tricks, spinning in the air, dispersing herself and snapping back together. She giggled. Teddy giggled back. After a couple of minutes, Myrtle looked back at Remus. "Why did you call for me?" she asked, sounding suddenly suspicious.

"I just wanted to wish you a happy Christmas, Myrtle," Remus said with his most disarming smile. Myrtle's eyes narrowed further behind her thick lenses. It made Remus' heart ache.

“All right,” she said. “Happy Christmas, I guess.”

“I have a bit of news, too. I thought you might want to know.”

Myrtle immediately looked nervous. She began to wring her hands, accidentally popping one of her fingers off. She quickly caught it and reattached it, as if this happened frequently. “Nothing bad!” Remus said. “Quite the opposite.”

“Oh. What happened, then?”

“I’ve just heard they’re awarding a posthumous Order of Merlin to Regulus Black. Second Class. Harry Potter has been lobbying for First Class, but it seems even his influence has its limits.”

“Regulus Black? Slytherin, 1979, Quidditch Captain, Head Boy, Died Young Under Mysterious Circumstances?”

“Yes,” Remus said wearily, “the very same.”

Myrtle’s brow wrinkled. “I thought he went bad.”

“He did, for a time. Then he did something very brave to help kill Tom Riddle, and no one ever found out until about a year ago.”

“I see.” Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Myrtle’s eyes seemed to grow shinier. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Like I said, I thought you’d want to know. You were friends, once, weren’t you?”

“Friends?” Myrtle sniffled. “Well, I suppose sometimes he’d talk to me...”

Remus felt as if he might cry, too. He felt heavy, but not weighed-down. “You remember them all, don’t you?” he asked softly. “All of the children who’ve passed through this place...”

Myrtle shrugged. “A few stand out,” she said.

“Myrtle, do you remember about me?” He hadn’t planned to ask it, but the question just slipped out. He wasn’t sure if he should elaborate further.

She considered him. “I do, and I don’t,” she said. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, but I think I also do, a bit.”

“Oh.” That didn’t clear anything up.

“It’s different for people like me. People who exist in between. Sometimes it feels like it all loops around” — she did an illustrative loop — “or blurs together” — she shimmered like mist, then became clear again — “and other times, it’s solid and opaque.”

“I see.” Remus tilted his head. “Are there different ways of being in-between?” In his mind’s eye he saw the veil, translucent and blurry.

“I don’t know,” Myrtle said, “but I can’t see why not. I’ll bet there are as many ways of being dead as there are of dying. The universe is full of funny things.”

“That it is.” Remus smiled again, and he meant it. “Thank you, Myrtle. You’re a good friend.”

Myrtle blinked, her wide eyes magnified enormously behind her spectral spectacles. “Am I?” she

asked.

“You are, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” Remus said. “Goodbye for now, Myrtle.”

“Toodle-oo, Remus Lupin and Baby.” With a gaping yawn that provided her with an excuse to wipe her eyes, Myrtle pirouetted gracefully back down the toilet drain.

Finally, Remus wandered out to the banks of the loch, though dusk was fast approaching. It was one of those relatively balmy days that sometimes strike in the dead of winter. The sun had turned the crunchy hoarfrost into sludge, but Remus didn’t mind. He welcomed all the scents awakened by the momentary thaw. Even though they had only just passed the winter solstice, there was a murmur of spring on the breeze.

Tracing the shoreline for a little while, then veering slightly off course, Remus found himself under the shade of the old yew. To him, it felt like barely any time had passed since he’d last leaned against its gnarled trunk. And perhaps it hadn’t; what were twenty years to such an ancient tree? Yet still, the tree bore witness to the passage of time. A massive bough lay decaying beneath it, severed clean off during the fighting; its needles withered but not yet entirely shed. The tree, which now had a lopsided look about it, was marred with scorch marks, though fortunately these seemed only to be surface wounds. Remus placed a hand on the trunk and looked up at the canopy.

Directly above him was a small but healthy-looking globe of mistletoe. He wondered, briefly, if it was charmed there for the holiday, but he dismissed that idea; the plant was clearly well-established. A real living thing. Remus wavered for a couple of minutes, rapt. Then Teddy woke up and began to gurgle. “Shh,” he whispered, “We’re going soon, I promise.” He nearly said, *we’re going home*, but he hadn’t quite sorted out where that was, yet.

Remus pointed his wand at the mistletoe and uttered a summoning charm. Beautiful as it was, it was still a parasite, and the poor old yew had been through enough without some hanger-on draining its vitality. It took several tries to make the mistletoe disentangle from the yew, but Remus didn’t want to use a more aggressive spell for fear of damaging the host tree. Finally, the mistletoe detached and came hurtling toward him. Remus yelped and ducked so that it wouldn’t hit Teddy, who now looked quite astonished.

Remus crouched on the ground beside the fallen mistletoe. He didn’t want to leave it in the muck, either. Suddenly, he felt very sure of what he had to do. He plunged his hand into the leaves and tore off seven sprigs. *Seven cardinal sins lifted away. Seven acts of love sprung in their place.* Or perhaps it meant something else entirely, something he could never fully understand. Remus carefully traced his wand over the seven sprigs and banished them. He didn’t know where they would end up; he didn’t think it was for him to decide. He only focused on his intention as they disappeared: *go wherever you need to be. Find whomever you’re meant to find.*

Teddy began to fuss in earnest. Remus wrapped both arms around him, reaching under the voluminous hood of Teddy’s winter coat to cradle his little head in the cup of his hand. “I know. You’ve been so patient today,” he murmured in gratitude. “Let’s go warm up.”

Newly sprung in June

*In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
where the straight path was lost.*

“You’re not my Beatrice.”

“No? Let’s see — beautiful emerald-eyed lady, beloved since childhood, died tragically young, literally manifests in a cloud of lilies — ‘Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!’ ... nope, I just can’t think of anyone else who fits the bill. Guess it must be me, then.” Remus sat beside Severus in the soft, fragrant grass. “But seriously, your metaphor’s all mixed-up. If anything, you’d be my Beatrice. Or maybe you’d make a better Virgil; at least, if Dante fancied Virgil. Do you think Dante fancied Virgil? I think he wouldn’t’ve kicked Virgil out of bed, even if it did earn him a few centuries going clockwise ‘round the flaming mountain.”

“You sound like a sixth-year who’s just taken his first Muggle Literature module.”

Remus smiled. “You mean endearingly enthusiastic?” he asked. Then he sighed. “I have been doing a lot of reading. It’s a comfort to me. There are still so many things I just can’t get my head around,” he admitted. “You breathed. You cast a shadow. You had a heartbeat — at least, I think you did.”

“You’re not relying on Dante for factual information now, are you?”

“No. Well, I don’t know. I’ve just been so desperate to understand...”

“Don’t be. You were right, Lupin. I can admit that now. Not everything needs to be understood. Not yet.” A tiny smile played on Severus’ lips. “It’s magic, Remus.”

Remus reached out to touch Severus’ face. His hand didn’t go through. “This isn’t real, is it? It’s another dream.”

“It is a dream,” Severus said, “but why should that mean it isn’t real?”

Severus turned his head and kissed the palm of Remus’ hand. In the dream, his palm was scarred.

“Is Lily there with you?” Remus asked.

“Yes, and no,” Severus said. All of his answers were cryptic like that, but Remus couldn’t help asking nevertheless. “She’s not the same Lily she was when I knew her, and I am not the same as when she knew me. I think I’m better, now.”

"But are you happy?"

Severus seemed to consider this question carefully. "Yes. Very happy."

"And there are people there who love you?"

"Yes. I believe so."

"I wish you could see my life now. I wish you could've met Teddy. He's perfect, Severus. He's the best thing in my life."

"I hope I will not meet him for a very long time."

There was nothing to say to that, so Remus leaned forward, resting his chin on Severus' shoulder. "I think I'm better now, too," Remus whispered. "I think maybe... I think I've actually become the kind of person who can raise a child."

"I think so too," Severus whispered back. "And I want you to be happy while you're still alive. Now open the window."

Remus frowned. That was even more cryptic than usual. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Open the window. Don't you hear?"

"What window?"

"The one above your bed. You're waking up, Remus."

"Oh, no. I want to stay a little while..."

The rapping on the window grew sharper. Annoyed, Remus sat up and twisted around to open the latch. He wasn't sure what time it was; this close to the summer solstice, it might have been five in the morning or he might have slept through breakfast. Probably the latter, if he was receiving post.

Remus bribed the owl quiet with a few treats he kept in his bedside table for this purpose, then sent it swiftly on its way. Teddy was afraid of owls, of all things, but especially barn owls with their ghostly faces. This one worked at the local post office. Remus found it much more efficient to have his letters delivered all at once like muggles do, although some inconsiderate people still insisted on sending separate owls for every little thing, which always sent Teddy into a tizzy.

Sitting up in bed, Remus sifted through the stack, setting aside the three envelopes he actually cared about. He slipped them into the pocket of his dressing gown and went to collect Teddy from his cot, then set about making breakfast. At present, Teddy was a fiend for waffles with banana. It was a little time-consuming to prepare them every morning, but as long as Teddy was eating, he was happy; and he was too besotted to deny Teddy anything. Besides, Remus liked waffles too.

Remus alternately fed Teddy and himself with one hand while holding the letters in his other. It was a skill he'd nearly perfected since Teddy had started eating solid food. He began with the least personal letter, which was also the most anticipated. The envelope bore the return address of *Potions Theory & Methods*, an unimaginatively titled but highly respected publication favoured by all the most serious potioners. Nervously, he broke the seal. A moment later he whooped, accidentally flinging a piece of banana across the kitchen in his excitement. The editors had accepted the paper on Pseudoamortentia (*Snape, Severus and Slughorn, Horace, with Lupin, R. J.* listed as a contributor).

Horace had certainly been surprised to receive this hitherto unknown, unpublished manuscript of Severus Snape's, and even more surprised to learn that he had co-authored it; but it hadn't been too difficult to convince Horace that he had advised on the project years before and merely forgotten about it. A promise was a promise, even one made in another lifetime.

Remus had always thought it prudent not to reveal his talent for forgery, even amongst friends and co-conspirators. In the end, his subterfuge had paid off. It helped that Remus had been permitted to take Severus' copious teaching and research files from his old office at Hogwarts — for which Remus simultaneously felt gratitude and consternation that no one else had even tried to claim them.

From there, Horace had tested the potion, and Remus had edited the article. Remus was euphoric the day he heard back from Horace that the brew was a success. It hadn't been a sure thing, since Remus had in fact recorded the recipe from memory, based on what may or may not have been an extended hallucination. The fact that the potion worked in the *real world* proved that, in some way, what Remus experienced had also been real.

Speaking of which: the next letter was from Hermione Granger, relating the most recent developments in her research on the Inconstant Moon Elixir. Amongst Severus' things, Remus had also 'discovered' several sheets of notes in Lily Evans' hand outlining a project she'd never been able to see to fruition. These he passed on to Hermione, who had the energy and skill to see it through. The research was still very much in progress, but Hermione sent Remus regular updates on her work. He looked forward to one day seeing Hermione's name next to Lily's at the top of a publication. Lily would have adored Hermione.

The third envelope came from Harry. Remus was perplexed at how thickly padded it was. Since Remus and Teddy saw Harry at least once a week, they didn't have much reason to exchange long letters. Indeed, the note from Harry was short and to the point:

Remus,

Remember when you asked me to look up that old schoolmate of yours, and I couldn't find anything on her? It's the weirdest coincidence. There was an article about her in last week's supplement to the Prophet. I almost threw it out without reading, but the picture caught my eye. You were right, she goes by a different name now.

See you Sunday!

– Harry

Remus turned his attention to the magazine clipping, which featured a glossy photo of a leggy woman in a black jumpsuit leaning against a vibrantly painted brick building.

“...I caught up with Diana Vane, better known by her pseudonym Claire de Lune, at her villa outside Rome, which she shares with her common-law wife of seven years and a scarlet macaw named Cherimoya. Once a fixture of the London club scene, de Lune made a name for herself in the ‘80s with her monumental abstract murals which astonished wizards and muggles alike. Now the avant-garde artist is returning to her roots with a new installation in Diagon Alley. ‘I’ve done everything else,’ de Lune told me with one of her trademark devil-may-care shrugs, ‘so I thought I might as well take the commission...’”

Remus grinned. The article put him in an immensely good mood. He would give it pride of place in his scrapbook, the one where he kept his evidence — evidence of people and things he would never have known about before his long dream. There, too, was a newspaper clipping of Vespasian Vane, personal secretary to Ms. Dolores Umbridge, trailing after her with a box of ceramic kittens during her ignominious removal from the Ministry. And here was a yellowing society column detailing the wedding of Agnes Greengrass, featuring a photo in which she was flanked by her brother Aristocles and his little daughters Daphne and Astoria, while her youngest brother scuffled awkwardly in the background. Not a Death Eater after all, as it turned out; just an unpleasant person.

Then there were the blank pages in his scrapbook; pages which Remus doubted he’d ever be able to fill. Remus had scoured the school records and Ministry archives over a quiet week in April, but he could find no trace of Roshanak Rosier after she passed her O.W.L. exams in June of 1981. No record that she’d ever been reported missing, either. Remus hoped fervently that she had disappeared to a safer place, like Peter’s little sisters had; that she was thriving somewhere under whatever identity she had assumed. After all, it hadn’t been all that uncommon, in those days.

Any one of these letters would have brightened Remus’ morning, but receiving all three at once felt like some kind of sign. Remus still wasn’t sure he believed in signs or omens, but these days his general policy was to accept the favourable ones and toss out the rest. Between the dream, and the potions, and the photograph, and the gorgeous weather that beckoned outside his window — it all seemed to point to one thing. Today was the day. It was finally time. “I think we’ll go on a little outing today, Teddy. Would you like that?” Remus asked. Teddy slammed a hand down on his plate and squished the remaining banana slices to a pulp. Remus chose to take that as a ‘yes.’

Remus had still not visited the war cemetery that lay just outside of Hogsmeade, even though he’d been back to Hogwarts three or four times since. At first, he hadn’t felt strong enough to go. Then, he felt that having put it off so long, he ought to wait until a meaningful occasion. Eventually, he had settled on: *when I’m ready, I’ll go*. Today, for the first time, he felt ready.

It was late in the afternoon by the time Remus and Teddy arrived in Hogsmeade. The sun was shining, though it wasn’t warm enough outside to dispense with jackets. (Remus, perhaps from some subliminal desire to be defiant, almost always wore muggle clothes these days.) Remus followed the little path that trailed away from the town, newly lined with wild cherry saplings that glistened after a midday rain shower. The cemetery was laid out over what had probably been a farmer’s field a hundred years earlier, and had more recently been a lush and empty expanse of grass. He drew in a deep breath to fortify himself. There were so many graves. Many of them were still marked by temporary wooden monuments, identical in form but adorned with individual tributes. On the far side was a large cenotaph made from polished black stone with gilded engraving. It had been erected on the first anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts (as the event was now known). Remus went there first.

He spent far too long searching for her name, because some incompetent had rendered it as

'Nymphadora Lupin.' Remus scowled. He pressed his wand into the 'N'. It took a few tries and quite a lot of concentration; it wasn't easy to transfigure something set in stone. Eventually, he got it looking reasonably close to the style of the other inscriptions: *Dora Tonks-Lupin*. There. He hoped that his magic would hold for a while, if not for a thousand years.

Remus turned away from the cenotaph, taking in the view from a different angle. He examined his own shadow on the wet grass, the fascinating light that scattered around the top of his head. The phenomenon wasn't as obvious as it would be at dawn when the dew was fresh and shadows were long, but Remus could still make out a faint glow.

"Do you see that?" he asked, pointing over the top of Teddy's pushchair. "There's a German term for it I can't remember, but some people call it Cellini's Halo. Cellini was a great Renaissance sculptor; I suppose you won't have heard of him yet, being only fourteen months old. Well, five hundred years ago, Cellini noticed what looked like a halo around his shadow, and he took it as a sign of God's approval. Like a divine *carte blanche* — proof of his righteousness. Must have been very reassuring to him, what with all the murders he did." Remus tilted his head to one side, watching the refracted light move with him. "I think about that a lot. All he had to do was ask another person — or even just be a little more observant — and he would have found out that *everyone* gets that same effect. There's a perfectly simple scientific explanation for it. But then, that wouldn't have suited his narrative nearly as well."

Teddy said something incoherent in response. Very soon, his child would be able to verbalise all the complex thoughts that ran through his little head. Remus couldn't wait for that day.

Remus ambled through the cemetery, taking time to read all of the names. Many were familiar to him; even more were not. Too many were the names of children he had known. So many, many children.

He had scoped out the location of Severus' plot upon arrival, but he waited until the end of his visit to go to it. Remus knew that it was already marked by a headstone of fine green-veined marble that Harry had paid for with his own inheritance. It stood apart from the other graves, sheltered by a natural dip in the earth and the shade of a willow whose knotted roots stretched toward a little brook that flowed into the lake. Remus approached with trepidation. He was already feeling depleted. Maybe he wasn't strong enough today, after all. He crested the gentle slope that led to Severus' resting place, and gasped.

Buttercups!

Buttercups, of course, were everywhere; it was June in Scotland, after all. But here they covered the earth so abundantly that they seemed to form a little sun radiating out from the stone; a halo of gold. *Heiligenschein* — that was the word. The flowers cushioned Remus' landing, welcomed him as he fell to his knees and twined his fingers in their pliant stems.

For a moment he was struck with a sense of perfect clarity, though later on, alone in his bedroom, he might grow uncertain again. "I didn't understand before," Remus whispered through his tears. "You were the centre; I was your satellite. It wasn't *my* dream; it was yours." He smiled with quivering lips. "I was in *your* dream all along."

He wept.

"Da?"

Remus jerked to attention. He wasn't sure how long he'd been kneeling there. "Yes," he cooed to Teddy, "we'll go in a minute." Remus selected a few buttercups and pressed them in his diary. He

wasn't sure what he would do with them, but he wanted to remember. The flowers were so dense on the ground that he could have pulled up fistfuls without making a visible dent. Remus thought about making a flower chain for Teddy, but he didn't trust his baby not to put the flowers in his mouth. "You're not supposed to eat buttercups," he said, almost conversationally, to the empty air. "I looked it up."

Remus took a moment to gather himself and check on Teddy. Before they left, he turned to look again.

I returned from the holiest waves

remade just like new plants

that are renewed with fresh leaves,

pure and prepared to rise to the stars.

They would be back again before too long. "Thank you, Severus," Remus mouthed silently.

Maybe that patch of earth had always teemed with flowers, and it was sheer serendipity that his love had been laid to rest there. Maybe; but it was no less beautiful for that. It was just one of those little quirks of fate, those private moments of wonder that make living worthwhile. And it did; Remus was struck by the realisation that he was grateful to be alive.

Lying in hospital after the Battle of Hogwarts, Remus Lupin has a lovely lucid dream that he's gone back to his school days at Hogwarts. Only the day passes, then another, and another, and soon he must face the terrifying possibility that it isn't a dream — that he has irreparably altered the events of the past.